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STORIES

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John Brunner
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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

We have a sick defense industry. We have a sputtering national space program.

When will we start to realize that each can be used to rescue the other?

The defense industry is sick because of the sudden and dramatic outbreak of peace that struck the world in 1990. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and, apparently, in the Soviet Union has removed the enemy who, as the "Evil Empire," served for more than forty years to provide the justification for massive military expenditures by the United States. As we look around, blinking and confused in the sudden bright light of the post-Cold War world, we see some troublesome economic problems surfacing — the so-called "dark side" of peace.

It turns out that of America's 435 Congressional districts, the economies of 138 are heavily dependent on military expenditures. Although the Soviet Union still retains its formidable nuclear arsenal and can hardly be completely ruled out as a potential danger to American security, it has become apparent even to the most confirmed hard-line Cold Warriors that there's no need in the present-day world to maintain a constantly increasing military build-up, and that in fact we can actually do a little scaling-down of our armed forces. That scaling-down has already begun. Arms contracts are being cancelled; new ones are being scrapped; the defense industry has begun to suffer.

As the pace of demilitarization begins to increase, we hear more and more about the layoff of workers in the impacted industries. Boeing is letting 5,600 people go. Grumman, Lockheed, Northrop, Rockwell International, General Dynamics, and others are making similar employment cuts. McDonnell Douglas, the nation's largest military contractor, laid off 8,000 of the 49,000 workers at its Long Beach, California, plant in 1989, and in the summer of 1990 announced planned companywide reductions of 17,000 more, 13% of its total work force. Even where contracts continue in force, troubles are multiplying. Many of those contracts, signed in the 1980s, called for development of high-tech weapons at a fixed price. The unstated understanding was that if a company experienced cost overruns because developing the new weapons proved more complex than anticipated, the Department of Defense would somehow be able to come through with makeup payments. That isn't happening now. The losses are there — in 1989 alone, major prime defense contractors dropped $2.3 billion on cost overruns, and this year the figure will be even bigger. But no one is talking about makeup payments, nor are there any fat new contracts coming along to help soothe the defense companies' wounds. "The whole defense industry is a disaster," said former Undersecretary of Defense Donald Hicks. "And the people who signed on all these contracts are gone."

Meanwhile, over at the govern-

ment's civilian-run space program, things don't look a lot happier. The Hubble telescope, launched with such fanfare, is proving to be a technical and public-relations catastrophe. The thing won't focus, apparently it wasn't properly tested before being sent into space, and now we hear that it might well have been possible to achieve the Hubble's intended goals without sending an observatory into space at all. Meanwhile, our fleet of space shuttles is springing leaks all over the place, plans for manned and unmanned exploration of Mars and perhaps even the Moon once again have been moved back and back and back, and NASA continues to puzzle over the problem of how to pacify an increasingly thrifty and timid Congress that is terrified of any sort of repeat of the horrendous *Challenger* shuttle explosion — an event that set the American space exploration timetable back by close to a decade, by reminding ordinary citizens that it is sometimes possible for people to get killed when they venture into unknown frontier territory. Risk, loss, emotional distress — these are not popular concepts in modern America. And the loony idea of putting a young, pretty schooolteacher aboard the *Challenger*, where she could get killed just like anyone testing the boundaries of the possible, brought the whole thing home to millions of television viewers in the most negative imaginable way.

The space program is foundering because it's in the hands of bureaucrats responsible to politicians. The defense program is choking because it's a costly titan that seems to have outlived its own purpose and thus has forfeited its claim to a share of the national budget.

And yet it was those same defense companies — Rockwell, Lockheed, General Dynamics, McDonnell Douglas, and the rest — that built most of the hardware that took American astronauts to the Moon, back in the glory days of the space program, twenty years ago.

Does that suggest anything?

The defense contractors see the troubles coming. Already, we read, defense-induced recessions are under way in sixteen states, and the real budget-slashing hasn't begun yet at the Pentagon. Not much is being done yet to retrain workers or to retool for other endeavors, but at least some of the companies have begun to think about it. The contractors, says Robert Paulsen, a military advisor for the consultant firm of McKinsey & Company, are "sticking with the technical skills they have and seeing if they can find applications in a related market." Obviously, he says, "They're not going to go into toasters." But Lockheed announced in the summer of 1990 that it would begin doing maintenance and modification work on Boeing 747 aircraft at one of its Southern California plants, thereby saving the jobs of 900 workers. (7,000 more will be laid off.) Other companies are looking at mass transit systems projects, energy generation concepts, diversified technical developments, anything that will keep their vast pools of highly skilled workers and scientists occupied.

And space?

There isn't much that's happening there. American business has become fixated on immediate profit — that horrible cliché, "the bottom line" — and space doesn't produce immediate profits, at least not yet. There are plenty of profit possibilities from spin-off products, yes, and commercial communications satellites have been in the black for years, but the big money

will come from setting up electrical generating plants in orbit that can beam cheap power back to Earth, building hotels on the Moon, mining the asteroids, etc., etc. — projects for the twenty-first century.

They'll be projects brought to fruition by Japan, France, Germany, and other countries not yet quite in their technological class, too, if we don't start to get moving ourselves again.

Doing what?

What about shifting some of our vast military outlays into a revivified program of space exploration? I know that there are plenty of people who would like to see those vast outlays turned entirely toward social purposes — spending the "peace dividend" on education, welfare, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and so forth — and no doubt some of that will happen, as it should. But however worthwhile it is to feed the hungry, it doesn't provide much in the way of national economic benefit — especially if a lot of those hungry people are unemployed defense workers.

Some of the military money can well be redeployed to space work. Those 138 Congressional districts where defense industries are shutting down have 138 members of Congress worried; surely that's a good enough nucleus for a political thrust toward renewed space enterprise.

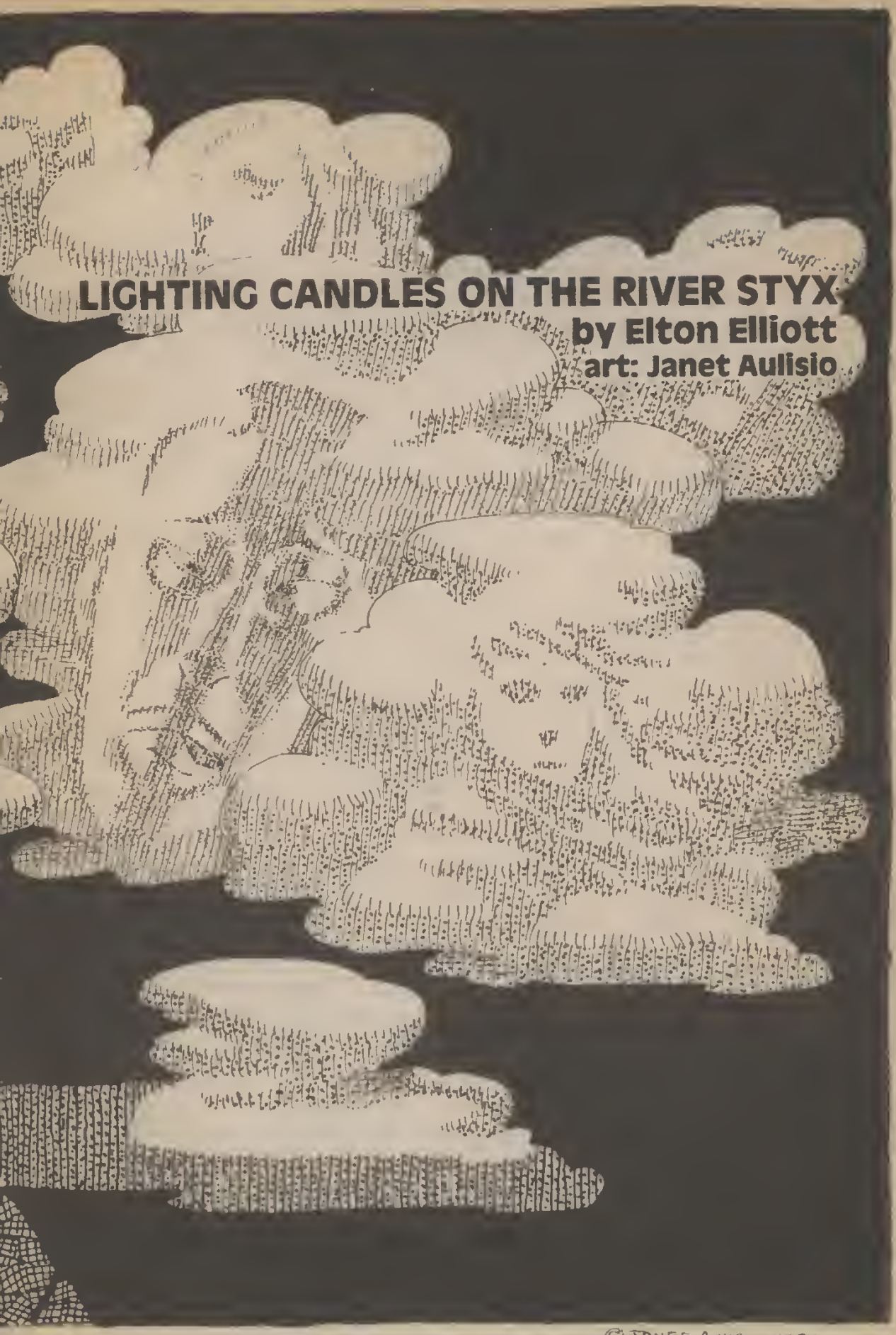
Am I advocating a vast new government space program under the control of the same visionary NASA bureaucrats who gave us the shuttle messes and the Hubble events, with the fine minds of our Congressional leaders providing constant input?

Not exactly. *Private* development of space is the way to go, I think, at least in the long run. We've seen enough of socialism in this century to understand how well it works. At a time when other countries are selling off their publicly owned telephone systems and even privatizing their post offices, we don't want to co-opt the future of the Solar System into some new bureaucratic boondoggle run by civil servants.

But all that defense money in the current budget can be used as pump-priming for the space industry of the twenty-first century. We can't simply turn the military-money spigot off completely, even though peace may well be at hand. Like it or not, we have a defense-based economy. Millions of American jobs depend on it. If we were to terminate all military spending tomorrow, as some would like to see, we'd plunge into a vast depression.

We can afford to spend a hundred billion a year subsidizing the spaceliners and orbital resorts of the future out of existing government funds. By the time the commercial payoff is at hand, the government can step back and let private industry do the rest — and get its investment back a thousand times over simply by taxing the profits in the millennium ahead.




LIGHTING CANDLES ON THE RIVER STYX
by Elton Elliott
art: Janet Aulisio
©JANET AULISIO 1990

Elton Elliott has worked at various times as a political fund-raiser, telephone salesman, clerk at a magazine shop, and part-owner of a computer software service company. He currently is editor and publisher of SFR Publications, publisher of the newly revived Science Fiction Review. *He lives in Keizer, Oregon, where he writes an occasional column of political and social commentary for the nearby regional newspaper, the* Salem Statesman-Journal.

Jonas Kernes rode the Sea-Tac Orbital Elevator down from geosynch three weeks after Greater Seattle, along with all of Earth, vanished — just the people, not the real estate.

From his seat, Jonas, a tall, thin man with shoulder-length brown hair and green eyes, wearing a charcoal-gray four-piece Bennington nanobody suit, peered out as Greater Seattle filled the window. The city looked the same as it had thirteen years ago — when he left Kaycee behind. The Space Needle still towered over the old downtown, its slim elegant form a forgotten altar to an earlier era's optimism. Jonas grimaced. If only they had known the future then, he mused, humanity might have dismantled every machine, destroyed every building, ripped off all of their clothes and run howling into the hills. In his more bitter moments, he often thought it might have been a better fate than what had apparently happened to them.

The automated warning voice of the Elevator announced disembarkation in two minutes. Jonas took one more look north at the Needle. The antique bucket cars that once crept constantly up and down its sides weren't moving; they appeared stuck in amber at the top. Jonas looked out at Interstate Five. The same lack of motion prevailed there, and although he didn't expect to find any activity, seeing the lanes empty and the grassways below filled with recently abandoned hovercars brought home to him the enormity of the change that had taken place since he left.

Hoping that perhaps something or someone had survived, Jonas gazed farther into the distance, past the rest of the high-rise structures of Greater Seattle all the way to the mirror-smooth waters of Puget Sound. Rationally, he knew that he would find nothing, but he still desperately searched for a sign of movement, anything that would contradict the horrifying truth spotted from orbit by the gigantic telescopes of the Puritan Islands. But telescopes don't lie. Nothing in this vastness moved. He didn't see anything that indicated that a single human had escaped the devastation.

Finally, the Orbital Elevator car slowed to a stop. Questions swirled in his mind, a riot of recrimination and guilt. What had happened to Earth? Why hadn't he done a better job of explaining his fears to Kaycee? Fears he had in common with the thirty million other humans who had moved to the Puritan Islands. The name Puritan Islands, originally used as a derisive term by those who joined the Multisys, had stuck. Those who lived amongst the

habitat Islands had turned the name into one of honor. Puritan Islands, home of pure humans, not those contaminated by the Multisys.

The Multisys. Jonas shuddered as he thought of that complex computer hookup with all of humanity combined with Artificial Intelligences, part religion and part insanity, and what it had done to Earth. Again Jonas thought of Kaycee, of the life they could have had together and how the dawn of the Multisys ended that.

It took all of Jonas's willpower not to think of Kaycee as he exited the Elevator and grabbed the nearest hovercar, an old Ford Mark Two. Before turning on the motor, he checked his emergency signal. Fine. He started the car. It purred reassuringly. For a moment Jonas wondered why some machines calmed him while others frightened him. Shouldn't all machines have an emotionally neutral feel? Still, he loved these old hovercars.

Driving north up Interstate Five, he was overcome by memories of his youth. It was especially difficult as he passed the old Southcenter Mall, the bowling alley near the Burien off-ramp and, finally, the decaying concrete hulk of the Kingdome. He fought to keep his personal memories under control. The Puritan Islands needed to know what had happened here — for their own survival if nothing else.

Without realizing where he was driving, he was over Lake Washington heading toward a familiar marina. A brief smile touched the corners of his mouth. Old habits die hard; he landed on the hoverpad next to Kaycee's houseboat.

As he stepped onto the floating planks that led to Kaycee's, the sloshing of water released long-suppressed memories to the surface of his mind. From the time he had started dating her it had taken him months to get used to the feel of the planks swaying under his feet. He liked solidity — even as a kid he didn't enjoy waterbeds, even when all of his friends were buying them. The only time he ever slept on a waterbed was at his Uncle Jerry's house. The feel of motion under him as he tried to sleep unnerved him. Every time he turned over in the night he'd awaken, feeling as though he were drowning in a huge tidal wave.

The constant rocking motion in Kaycee's houseboat made every night he slept there a water torture of a different sort. When he mentioned it to her, she said she didn't even notice the motion anymore, that it was just something he'd have to get used to. "Something he'd have to get used to," Jonas thought, described perfectly how he felt about breaking up with Kaycee.

Even after thirteen years the houseboat, off-white with light gray trim, looked the same as it had the last time he had seen Kaycee. He played that night over in his mind as he walked up the stairs to the roof. Jonas remembered many nights spent on the roof cuddling on her oversize chaise longue looking out across the lake. They both loved Lake Washington. Ever since childhood he had had an endless fascination with the patterns made by the millions of lights from the houses and hotels surrounding the shoreline.

Jonas had often thought that his interest in the interplay between light, night, and water might have been what caused him to go into architecture.

It suddenly struck him that he had never asked Kaycee why she went into law instead of art. Art had obviously been very important to her. She told him that she had moved onto the lake because it inspired her. The waterscapes strewn around her house testified to that. He felt ashamed to realize that he knew so little about her. He hadn't been aware of how self-centered he had been in those days. Now that she was gone he would give anything just to ask her one question — any question — and was haunted by the thought that it was probably too late.

Unbidden, like a recurring nightmare, memories of his last night with her surfaced again. Despite his best efforts over the last thirteen years to forget the memory of that night, it remained clearer than yesterday.

He had just returned from a late-afternoon protest rally against unilateral establishment of the Multisys. Kaycee was standing near the edge of the roof, wearing the black jumpsuit that he had purchased for her in New Anchorage. The cool evening breeze fanned her auburn hair out like a flickering fire on a deserted beach. The roof lights of the houseboat framed the delicate panes of her face in cool tones of turquoise.

He had explained to her his worries about joining the Multisys. In the past she had always claimed to be uncommitted, and once again he had tried his best arguments on her. Ever the eager attorney, she had always risen to the occasion by playing devil's advocate. But that night she seemed strangely withdrawn. Jonas remembered asking what was wrong. In a quiet voice she told him that she had decided to accept entry into the Multisys. Jonas didn't remember his immediate response, only that he had objected fiercely to her decision. Her words echoed down the long, lonely years.

"Why? You use the nanoboosters too. With the Change Plagues still around, everybody does. Without the nanotech boosts you'd be dead like many of the so-called natural humans. Their gods didn't rescue them from the grave, and the only way we survived was by turning our bodies over to the nanoboosters."

Jonas tried to answer. He couldn't express most of his fears clearly because he didn't understand them; he just knew in his gut that he didn't want to be a part of the Multisys. When he thought about joining it, he felt like he was back at Uncle Jerry's, facing the waterbed.

On reflection he knew that his response to her comments had come out wrong, incomplete, as it had every time they argued.

"I just think it's indecent to hook myself into a computer system where the rest of the world can read my thoughts. What will happen to privacy? I can't imagine a better way to oppress dissidents than to peer into their minds."

"That's not fair, Jonas, and you know it," she said, her voice remaining

steady; even in argument Kaycee remained the proper attorney talking to the judge in chambers. "The Multisys is just an instant worldwide access net, with complete on-line information like the old hypertexts, except the interface is eliminated."

"But what if I like that interface? Don't you feel any need for privacy?"

"No. Why do you? Are there any thoughts you're ashamed of, that you don't want to share?"

"Yes."

"Aha!"

"Aha, nothing. Privacy is what gives life or a relationship some mystery, some excitement. Boredom —"

"Is," she cut in, "what you're telling me our relationship is."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I knew your desire not to belong to the Multisys didn't have anything to do with abstract philosophy; it has to do with me, and the Multisys was just a convenient excuse."

" 'Belong to the Multisys.' Listen to yourself! You sound like a bad advertisement for door-to-door religious cultism. And the Artificial Intelligences, they're the drugs of the late twentieth century reborn in twenty-first-century nanotech guise."

"That's not fair."

Even now he could hear the hurt in her voice. Too late, he had realized how deeply his words had cut. He remembered putting his hand on her shoulder, anything to take away the sting, lessen the pain. She had jerked away.

"Look, you can fool other people, Jonas Kernes, but not me." Her voice rose, the cool presence of the attorney in judicial chambers forgotten. Jonas now felt the anger of the prosecutor in front of a jury, hot after a reluctant witness. "I know you, and moving up to the Puritan Islands with a bunch of Luddites isn't your style."

"I wouldn't call those who value freedom and privacy —"

"Well, I would. Just get out and run away, that's what you do best. Run away to your mountain in the sky; I never want to see you again!"

She spun and ran down the stairs.

"And you won't if you allow them to hook you up into that wretched thing," he yelled, but she had left, and his petulant retort echoed bleakly over the lake.

Jonas wondered as he walked onto the ramp leading down into the houseboat's living room, why do memories of hurtful words linger when happier moments fade.

Stepping into the living room, Jonas was surprised to find it unchanged, except the mantelpiece; in place of Kaycee's quiet painting of a fishing boat winding its way through the San Juan Islands, hung an odd multicolored

mural. The new painting, a maze of nautilus-like color swirls that had an intricate interior structure, was certainly a departure for Kaycee. It reminded him of an old computer representation of fractal equations he had seen as a kid in grade-school computext. The painting had a subtle, shimmering iridescence that gave it a peculiar beauty and yet, as Jonas stared at it, there was something about it that felt wrong. He tried to figure out what it was, but as he stepped back and tried to look at it from a different angle, his stomach became queasy.

As he retreated into the den, he tried to shake off the nausea by telling himself that it was only the motion of the houseboat that was making him ill. Here in the den he noticed the same picture on the wall behind Kaycee's computer screen. It had replaced a photograph of the two of them snowskiing at Hoodoo Bowl. A chill crept up his spine and into his brain. Ever since childhood Jonas had always been able to sense if somebody was staring at him behind his back. He spun around; nobody was in the room, but he couldn't shake off the sensation that he was being watched, that somewhere, someone or something was watching him — laughing at him, or plotting against him. He felt as a child again, when every shadow on the wall was some fantastic monster sent by demons to lure him into the underworld. He knew it was irrational, but suddenly he had to get outside, had to see sunlight and breathe fresh air.

He ran back up onto the roof, took a couple of deep breaths, and willed his mind to slow down. His hands shook as he grabbed the railing and looked down into the water. Where had everyone gone? He was here to find out what had happened, not to mentally flagellate himself over past mistakes or frighten himself with childhood fantasies.

The idea of humanity vanishing still felt more like a nightmare than solid reality. Yet he remembered the very real fear he felt when he first heard about it. He had been home, placing the illuminants on the shoreline of his lake. After completing work on the latest pieworld habitat, Freedom Island, he had retreated into semiretirement to his self-designed private estate on Freedom's sister habitat, Liberty Island. His house covered a small peninsula that jutted out into a large lake he had named New Washington. After moving in, he had set about completing a grandiose project, lighting the entire lake with illuminants — computer-generated lights — programmed with the same turbulent patterns of incipient chaos that had proved so successful in aiding the nanomachines in their intricate process of building the biospheres of the pieworld habitats. Wilderness. The genuine wildness he remembered from the Earth of his youth. That's what he was trying to achieve on the pieworlds. With his own worldlet he wanted order, not chaos, the past without the pain.

He was absorbed in a tape contrasting Akkaddian and Elamite temple architecture while adjusting the plans for the next series of illuminants when the Island's remote sensors notified him of the arrival of a transfer craft. He

had watched as the swept-wing vehicle eased down next to his house. They hadn't identified themselves, citing security priority. He recognized the man and woman as soon as they stepped from the ladder. The short, stocky man was Dr. Ericks, one of the Puritan Islands' renowned physicians and an expert on reanimation, even before the Multisys, who had rescued many people from cryonic storage. The woman was Therese McClannon, a tall brunette, currently Head Councilor of Free Humanity, as the overwhelming majority of Puritan Islanders preferred to call themselves. Jonas had escorted her once at an official ceremony celebrating the completion of the axion ramjet. She had seemed distant ever since, and Jonas had never been able to figure out why.

Both of them were very quiet. Jonas knew that look: somebody had died. Ever since his mother had passed away in a train crash when he was fourteen, and his older sister had stopped by school to tell him, he had known that look. Therese's face showed pain and numbness.

"Jonas, something has happened to Earth." Her words sent chills racing up and down his spine.

Listening to her tell the incredible story of what had happened to Multisys humanity made Jonas numb. She told him the few details that reached the Puritan Islands' habitats. The Islands, isolated as they were, by choice, from the omnipresent hookups of the Multisys, had limited communication lines with the rest of humanity. The Islands had listened to the few frantic pleas sent out over old-style radio.

It had all begun a month ago. No one was sure what caused it, but the first effects were noticed at the trans-Plutonian Stations. Freighters coming in from the outer systems brought back word of an incredible mystery. All of humanity at the edge of the solar system had disappeared. Entire space habitats, all the way from stations containing a few hundred people to massive worldlets holding thousands, were deserted. Abandoned spacecraft plowed on out into the lonely interstellar vastness.

Then communications ceased from the outposts in the Belt and the Martian colonies. Finally, the great Lunar Bases and Lagrange worldlets went silent. It happened in a single day. Around the clock, hurriedly scheduled conferences with all of the scientists in the advanced, prosperous, and peaceful worldlets revealed nothing. Earth, still under the spell of the Multisys, refused to communicate with those not already hooked up. The Islands wanted to help, but they wouldn't go back on their decades-old decision never to pollute themselves with the Multisys. Their messages sent over the traditional radio/visual channels went unanswered.

Then the final moment came. Something bright flashed in from the far side of the Moon, aiming toward Earth. The Islands' telescopes took pictures of a glittery object shaped like a chinese lantern moving toward the north polar regions. Suddenly, it shifted course and settled over the Antarctic, where it disappeared.

The defense forces of the Puritan Islands had readied various nuclear and molecular weapons of destruction and prepared to hurl them at any sign of attack. Still, three weeks passed and Earth remained silent, with no sign of the strange glittery object.

Jonas shuddered, imagining the chilling gloom that must have descended upon everyone in the aftermath of the mysterious holocaust that had quietly removed humanity from its ancestral home. To have watched that silent demise and been unable to prevent it — or even know why it was happening — must have been awful.

He remembered asking them what they wanted from him, and Dr. Ericks described their plan. Ericks and McClannon would serve as a forward team, assisting him, while four members of McClannon's staff volunteered as a back-up team. Jonas was chosen because of his familiarity with the habitat modeling programs, which were vaguely similar to the computer nanoarchitecture of the Multisys. The council hoped that he could locate the worldwide computer system, verify whether it was still up, and, if it was, design a program to slip into it and extract any information that could help them understand what had happened to humanity.

While Jonas never said yes, his immediate questions about the specifics of the plan were answer enough. In fact, he had never thought of rejecting their request or mentioning the obvious dangers — the nanobody suit should protect him from any bacterial problems — just as he had never thought of starting his search in any place on Earth other than Greater Seattle.

As he turned around and looked back at the city's skyline, the buzz of an insect brought him back to the present. At least animal life hadn't been affected.

Then the thought struck him with the bracing effect of cold water on a hot summer evening. Why had the only effect of the invasion been the disappearance of Multisys humanity? Obviously there were still insects around, and presumably normal household pets. Why hadn't he seen any dogs or cats? Where were they? Were they hiding from someone — or something? What separated humans from animals? They both ate similar food, breathed the same air, drank the same water. The only item that was different was technology. Whatever had affected humans might have been accomplished through technology. What technology? Only one answer fit: the Multisys.

Jonas looked at the houseboat and knew that, despite his distaste and distrust of the Multisys, he had to check Kaycee's computer. He hoped the old way of accessing the computer without accessing the Multisys still existed.

In less than half a minute Jonas was staring at Kaycee's darkened computer screen. It looked like a normal RJ21, a flat screen twenty-five centimeters high by thirty centimeters wide. The actual size of the computer's memory and processing systems was smaller than a sugar cube, so most of

the screen size was to accommodate human eyes. Since most of the Multisys took place through the nano implants, the screen was a bulky back-up system, a fact Jonas planned to use to his advantage. He hoped that the screen had not been equipped with only nano implants, but still had old-style keyboard access. When he had used it thirteen years ago, it had normal input and output channels, and it was through those channels that he planned to extract the visual information. He also wanted to set up a text search, but he decided to start that after he was out of the visual part of the system. If the Artificial Intelligences still resided in their cybernetic limbo, he had no desire to disturb their crystal lattice musings by dropping a red flag, which an extended text search might well do.

He turned on the power switch.

The room shimmered and a gust of hot humid air rolled over him, sapping him of energy. Sweat trickled down into his eyes, causing him to blink and wince with pain. The screen showed a multicolored swirl identical to that in the pictures, except that this swirl had a depth and dimension that the artwork lacked. It also had something cold, cruel, and inhuman. It had to be an Artificial Intelligence.

He triggered the alarm. Nothing. He hit the back-up radio switch. No response there either.

He turned away from the screen and shut off the power switch. The feeling of coldness vanished. He had to remain calm and think. He hadn't actually touched anything but the power switch. Could they have hooked it up to come on-line by touching the power switch? The cold feeling seemed to have left, but he couldn't be sure. He had to get back to the Orbital Elevator, out of this insane emptiness and back to reality.

He headed up to the roof, expecting to find an empty sky and the old Ford Mark Two hovercar on the landing pad, and found a sky crowded with hovercars and a marina filled with children walking along the planks, laughing and talking to each other. A dog barked in the distance. He stood on the last rung of the stairs taking it all in.

The sky was blue, and Lake Washington as schizophrenic as ever, split in two by the greenways of the Mercer Island bridge, with the southern side mirror-calm and the waters to the north of the bridge choppy, even though the breeze was minimal. Dozens of sailboats dotted the lake, along with an occasional power-floater, which zipped between and around them, the telltale wake of a water-skier or the gaudily colored parachute of a sky-skier trailing behind. Hovercars floated serenely across the bridge lanes.

What stunned him more than the people was the normality of everything. It was as if God had set back a great cosmic sundial and returned the world back to a happier time. Maybe this wasn't the Multisys, after all. He wondered what Councilor McClannon, Dr. Ericks, and those on the back-up team would make of this. It made no sense. What would he do now? Return

home? He looked over to the landing and saw that his hovercar was gone.

He walked aimlessly toward the pad, trying to figure out what to do next, when a young boy, about ten, ran past him toward the shoreline.

"Stop," Jonas yelled.

The boy turned around and squinted as Jonas hurried over to him. "Young man," Jonas said feeling old. "Have you noticed anything odd recently?"

The boy looked at him speculatively for a moment.

"You some kind of sicko?"

Stunned, Jonas paused. Of all the possible answers or reactions, he hadn't expected that type of accusation.

"No." He hesitated, trying to think of what to say next. "I'm a reporter and I need information on a story I'm working on." It sounded plausible.

The boy put his hands on his hips. "My mother always told me the only old men who would stop and try to talk to me were sickos," he sneered. "And anyway I don't have time, I'm late for the game."

"What game?" Jonas felt stupid, but the boy's response continued to unnerve him, so he tried joviality. "What's your name?"

"Scream and Cry is the game, and I don't have a name, at least not one I want you to know." The boy turned around.

"What sort of game is that?" Jonas called out quickly.

Something wasn't right, but he felt he might learn more from a child than an adult.

The boy turned around and eyed Jonas as if looking at him for the first time. "You've never played Scream and Cry? You're really out of the loop! We always play Scream and Cry after we're born. Then after we become old enough, we start to get bored and try to get to the Other Side."

An idea about what had happened was trying to take shape in the back of his mind. He ignored it for the moment.

"The Other Side?" he asked.

The boy stomped his foot on the ground. His face turned red and his lips twisted briefly into a grimace. He looked away and his body shook for a second. When he turned back, his face had the same unconcerned expression it had when Jonas had first seen him.

"It figures you don't know about the Other Side. You looked odd to me. You sure you're not a sicko? Oh well, it doesn't matter. Just don't bother me, and you can walk along with me. If I don't leave right now, I'll be late for the game and then I might lose my place."

As they walked up the ramp to the shoreline, Jonas tried asking another question.

"What about the Other Side?"

"Typical adult. Only adults are obsessed about it."

"You ever been there?"

At the top of the ramp, the boy hopped onto the concrete of the esplanade.

"You're the strangest adult. Of course I haven't been to the Other Side. Look at me, I'm a kid. You think I'd be back here if I had gone over?"

"Are there any kids over there?"

"I don't think so. How would I know?"

"You ever want to go over there?"

"No, well, maybe, when I get old and tired of hurting the losers. I haven't hurt nearly enough, and right now I hear the game bell."

Jonas heard nothing as the boy darted across the esplanade onto the grassway.

"How can I find the Other Side?" he yelled after him.

"You can't, it'll find you," the boy shouted back over his shoulder.

Suddenly, a hovercar whooshed around a grove of trees and rushed toward the running boy. He yelled something at the car and grabbed for his back pocket. The car dived down, hit him, and sped on past. The boy lay in the road, motionless.

Jonas ran over to him. He bent down to look closer and couldn't see any injury at all. Suddenly, the boy turned over and scrambled to his feet.

Jonas didn't know which startled him more: the unhurt boy standing over him or the MZ-12 Autopistol in his tiny hand.

"Quick, let's get out of here. They'll be back."

He motioned with the pistol to a grove of trees on the other side of the grassway. Jonas ran after him. They climbed into the branches of a tall tree and looked out over toward the grassway, the esplanade, and the lake beyond.

"I got hit and it's all your fault," the boy yelled down at Jonas. "You stupid adult. You better leave or you'll be part of the game, and you'll be my main claim to fame today. I've never had an adult as a hit. Don't know that anybody else has either, but then I've never seen an adult as stupid as you are. I figure I could get bonus points for you, but before I could claim you, I'd probably end up getting hit again. Then even with bonus points I probably couldn't get to the torture round. You've ruined everything. I was looking forward to torturing somebody today. It's my turn you know."

Jonas had never thought himself capable of despising a child.

The boy yelled and hit the tree with his fist. Jonas wanted to caution him to be quiet and then thought that it'd be better not to antagonize the creature further. He just wanted to get out of here, but he still had a couple of questions that he wanted to ask, so he decided to wait until the tantrum was over.

He had a partially formed theory about what was happening, although the deliberate hit and run of the hovercar had thrown him off the track. Was he losing track of a line of thought? That wasn't supposed to happen with the nanoboosters, and that gave him another idea. Wherever he was, the nanoboosters didn't work. Was he in the Multisys? He tried to recapture his thoughts while the boy yelled and cursed and beat his fists against the tree.

Abruptly, Jonas realized he hadn't seen an adult since the world's appar-

ent return to normal. Then it all clicked, and he had one more question to ask the suddenly silent child.

"Just one more question and then I'll leave."

"Good."

"Where might I find another adult?"

"How should I know?"

"Is the entire world full of children, all the hovercars and other craft all driven by children?"

"What a stupid question. Of course."

"All the adults have gone to the Other Side, haven't they?"

"That's more than one question," the boy pointed the pistol at Jonas's head. "Now leave."

"Sure." Jonas knew how to get an answer for his final question.

He walked slowly away from the tree and then turned around.

"Why did you kids kill all the adults?"

"We didn't kill them, stupid; they stared at those damn pictures in their homes. What a sicko."

Jonas walked away, so stunned by the answer that he didn't notice the hovercar landing on the grassway. He walked right past a group of five children, three girls and two boys, heading toward the grove of trees. All the children carried machine guns, and one boy, older than the rest by enough years to begin a fair imitation of a mustache, lugged a portable energy gun. He gestured to the others, motioning for the other boy to run around to the opposite side of the grove.

"We'll drive him to you, so be ready," the boy warned.

The others fanned out and headed toward the trees. None of them paid any attention to Jonas. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't even hear the gunfire that erupted moments later. When the screaming began, he was already staring at the fractal pattern on Kaycee's screen.

He wasn't certain of what happened when he crossed over to the Other Side. One moment he sat in front of Kaycee's screen, the next he was floating over New Boeing Field south of Seattle. He could no longer deny reality. He was in the Multisys. Despite his fears, he had been swallowed whole; the tidal wave had reached out and grabbed his mind, depositing him on some alien shore, a small fish in an unknown sea. Whose sea? Questions flooded through Jonas's mind in an unceasing torrent. Who were these invaders who had caused Multisys humanity to disappear? Were they alien? Where were they from? Why hadn't those in the Islands been affected? How did the Multisys fit in? Did it make it easier to control humanity?

Finally, he shut his eyes, feeling sleepy. He had to rest, but he knew that he couldn't, not while he was in the Multisys. If he went to sleep, he might never awaken.

He opened his eyes and looked down, way down. Greater Seattle and

Lake Washington were mere specks. To his left Puget Sound was a small inlet of the larger mass of water, the Pacific Ocean. He was moving up into the sky at a rapid pace.

Panic seized him. He tried to pinch himself. Horror flooded through his mind. He felt nothing. There was only one logical conclusion: he had no arms. He tried to move his legs. Nothing. Again, there was only one logical conclusion: he had no legs. He couldn't move. Where was his body? He tried to look directly down to where his chest should be, but he couldn't see any sign that he had a body. Yet he could still see. How could he see without a body?

He looked around him. The sky was clear, and he had stopped rising. He seemed to be tethered like a hot-air balloon high above the waters of Puget Sound. What he had feared all along had happened; he was a bodiless piece of information afloat in the Multisys. That had to be what had happened when he had first touched the power switch to Kaycee's computer. The world of children, their bizarre games — all that had been an illusion of the Multisys. So much for his earlier, half-formed theory, that as a result of the Multisys all of the people were disguised as children, or that the children at the time of the disappearance had killed all the adults.

As to where he was now, Jonas figured that he was still stuck in the Multisys, likely in the section the boy had called the Other Side. Or he might be in whatever strange program or state the computer network had thrust him into when he looked at Kaycee's screen again.

If he was in the computer, where was his body? Was it still hunched over the screen at Kaycee's? If humanity had been sucked into the Multisys, or had retreated into it, then where were the bodies? How could he test his theories and get back to his body? What if he no longer had a body? What if he was doomed to this strange and barren landscape forever, floating aimlessly through the sky?

He wrenched his mind to the task before him. How could he get out? Maybe if he could get back to the screen, he could find a way out. No, that would have to be a last resort. Looking at the screen might send him farther away from reality and closer — to what?

Were there any people in this world? He looked back toward Greater Seattle, but all he could see was the white spire of the Sea-Tac Orbital Elevator spiraling toward the heavens. He realized that even if he were over the center of downtown, he would still be too high to see any people. He thought of the lake. Would Kaycee's houseboat still be there? Would his hovercar be parked on the landing pad?

Suddenly, he was heading east toward Lake Washington at a dizzying pace. Was it because he wanted to go there? If that were the case, he definitely wanted out of there. If he could wish, so could others.

He attempted to see his body. Nothing. He tried again. He couldn't see anything but the rapidly growing skyline of Greater Seattle. So there were

limits to wishing. He thought of going toward the Sea-Tac Elevator. Immediately, he changed directions. Fine, now to return to Kaycee's houseboat. Twenty feet above, he added.

He was now hovering over the houseboat. The hovercar landing pad was still empty. He tried to think as part of his mind whispered that the hovercar's absence might be crucial to his escape.

He needed to find someone who could answer his questions. Or didn't this sector — or circuit — have people?

He noticed a small cloud east of the lake. It appeared to be growing, moving toward him. It spun past him, pirouetted down until it stopped directly overhead, and rotated. Even its color, a pastel yellow-gray, looked wrong.

"Dreams are so much fun, but I'd like for once to actually be able to touch solid ground."

If he had a body that could have jumped, Jonas would have jumped. The voice startled him, but he knew it had to come from the cloud.

"It's not my body I miss so much as touching the ground," the voice, high-pitched, slightly clipped and definitely female, continued. "For a dancer the ground is the canvas of life."

He noticed that when the cloud talked, for he assumed that the voice came from the cloud, its color changed slightly. Gold striations appeared and vanished in rhythm with her voice.

"Who are you?" A deeper voice asked.

Jonas looked around. Where had the second voice come from? Then he realized it was his voice, even though it didn't sound like it.

"I'm the Dancer," the cloud responded.

"Where are we?"

"In the dream world, the Other Side from the real world."

"How did you get here?"

"I danced here."

He didn't seem to be asking the right questions, so he tried a new tack. If she couldn't tell him what had happened, at least she might be able to help him in other ways.

"What do I look like?"

"Just another cloud, a rather slow-moving cloud."

"What do you do here?"

"I perform on stage. I have boundless energy. I never stop. I'm in a large theatre, and there's a cheering crowd, as long as I don't look too hard. If I do, then I see the emptiness."

"Where are the other people in this world?"

"I don't know. They mostly keep to themselves, but they'll be around probably as soon as I leave. The ones that want to. They heard you. I did, so did they. We all hear each other if we want to."

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"After I got tired of the game."

For the first time since entering the Multisys, Jonas felt he had a chance to get out. He had established a relationship between the children's world and this place, the Other Side. If he could figure out how it started, how everyone became trapped in the Multisys, he might be able to reverse the process and escape. And if he did escape, he might have the information the Puritan Islands needed to protect themselves.

"When did you enter the game?"

"When I was born."

"How?"

"Like I said, I danced my way in, and now I must return to my stage. There are dances to perform. I'd like to learn ballet."

The Dancer's cloud moved away toward the gleaming, barely visible, snowcapped peak of Mount Rainier, picking up speed until it became a speck lost against the light blue of the noonday sky.

He noticed that she hadn't asked him anything. She seemed unconcerned about who or what he was and why he was asking questions. That might be helpful. Until he knew more, he didn't want to draw the attention of whoever or whatever now ran the Multisys.

The next cloud also flew in from the east. This cloud was crimson and violet, streaked with magenta and lavender.

"What may I do for you?" The deep, husky female voice sent an electric charge through him.

"Look, buddy," she added. Her voice was insistent. Every word brought forth blushes of brilliant turquoise that spread throughout the cloud, but vanished the instant she stopped speaking. "Make it quick, I don't have all day."

"Make what quick?"

"Your questions. I don't have all day. I have customers waiting."

"What kind of customers?"

"Take a guess."

"How did you know I want to ask you questions?"

"I heard your questions, thoughts, musings, all the way from Mount Rainier. You've been broadcasting to all of us ever since you arrived from the game. I've never heard such an inquisitive near-child before. You're lucky. In the old days I charged questioners double. But I like you. Your cloud's cute, if a little plain."

"What's your name?"

"Darleen. You get one more question."

"How did you get here?"

"I don't know. One day I was in the game, and the next I was on the Other Side."

"No, I mean before that. Before the game, what were you in the real world?"

"Look, I don't ask personal questions of my clients, and I expect the same

treatment. If you must know, I don't remember. Remembering takes away the urge to frolic."

Before Jonas could ask another question, her cloud swiveled off toward the mountains.

The next cloud arrowed in all pinstripe grays and blues and spun rapidly overhead.

"Please state your concerns rapidly. I have to check the O-T-C stocks."

No visible change occurred in the spinning cloud when the carefully modulated monotone voice talked. Jonas couldn't tell from the tone of what he immediately nicknamed the Stockbroker if this was a woman or a man.

"Do you remember — before?" Jonas asked.

"Of course! In the real world stocks were booming before all of the dreams started. Why, General Nanotech was going through the roof. I could barely keep up with the demand. It was so hot I even started buying shares for myself. I mean with everybody hooked up to the Multisys there wasn't anything in the world but General Nanotech."

"What happened then?" Jonas worked hard to keep the excitement out of his voice. He didn't want to scare the Stockbroker.

"Well, I knew it was too good to be true, so when Charon Station disappeared, I felt it was fated to happen. I had made too much money. Life is perverse. Only stocks make sense; they're not alive."

"Go on?"

"The rest of the Solar System went off the system."

"The Multisys, right?"

"Yes. Well, after that stupid game began. Can you imagine a world in which nobody cares about the Dow Jones average? It was sheer hell before I made it to the Other Side."

"Were you trapped?"

"I don't know. I was asleep, I woke up, and as I said, everybody was playing that damned game and nobody cared about the index of leading economic indicators."

Jonas thought for a moment. He needed to rephrase the question.

"Who caused it?"

"I believe it's all a Change Agent plot. After what they did to the southern hemisphere, I wouldn't put anything past them. Why, they used to time their attacks right before the quarterly reports were due — played havoc with the agricultural futures. But I've outsmarted them."

"How so?" Jonas tried to mask the eagerness in his voice.

"You see, I figure now that I'm on the Other Side events are more easily manipulated. Insider knowledge of a sort, you might say. So I used my knowledge of how mutable everything is to destroy the Change Agents. The Dow Jones is sixty-four thousand and climbing. You look like a sharp nononsense cloud. Come on board. I have this new company, a ten-to-one return in three months. KKR, eat your hearts out."

The Stockbroker's cloud began spinning faster.

"I'm sorry. Must leave. Just received word of an attempted takeover of Tamagata Assemblers. It's an LBO, the arbitrage boys must be ecstatic."

Jonas asked hurriedly, "Don't you want to return to the real world outside? The one where you have a body?"

"Hey, loved talking with you. Got to fly. Send me your resumé. We'll do lunch sometime."

The Stockbroker headed toward Mount Rainier.

The Psychic fluttered in after what seemed only seconds, although Jonas had no obvious way of telling time. The sun had not moved from its mid-afternoon position.

She started chattering before Jonas got a chance to ask a question. Her pink cloud dropped pearls on the ground.

"I sense a great void near here. Is that what you seek?"

"No. I want to know," Jonas said, in a tight, clipped fashion, "what you remember about the real world."

"There is no real world. It's all illusion. The only thing that is real is our minds, and in our minds we can dream. Dreams are helpful, very helpful. In dreams no one can harm you, all is real, and all is an illusion. Through dreams, enlightenment is possible with no effort at all."

"Through the Multisys?" Jonas interrupted.

"If it helps you on your spiritual path to believe so, then it is so. But now, my child, I must go. Those who have not yet evolved have need of me. I depart from you with petals on the wind as a remembrance of my presence."

She skip-flew away, leaving behind a trail of pink carnations floating down toward the now mirror-smooth waters of Lake Washington. The carnations withered and crumbled into dust as they reached the waters.

The Preacher was next. He was impossible to miss, soaring in on a cloud of pure, blinding white. As he spoke, small globules of scarlet dropped from the sky and tinged the edges of the cloud.

He started speaking before his cloud stopped, and Jonas never got a question through.

"You want to know how the world got to the state that it's in and is this God's purpose. I can answer: no. This is not God's purpose. Many times I have asked myself, could this be the rapture? No, I answered. You see, this can't be the rapture, since at least one of the righteous is still here. Even in my darkest nightmares of that cold, blind, black place that existed before all the dreams came, I could not conceive of such beauty, grace, and power as exists in this exalted state. My followers throng about me in the millions. They listen raptly to my every word. I have found many poor souls wandering in the darkness, and I have led them to the light and the truth. I remember people saying to me, 'Brother, do the games and these marvelous dreams mean this is hell and we have failed?' No, I answer.

"Of course there were times when I had my doubts. When I would scream

in the quiet, lonely hours of the night, 'Whither am I, oh God? Does this thy humble servant have thy blessing?' Sodom and Gomorrah are all around; the strangers were in my house, and I knew them not. Melchisedec, son of none, went up for an offering and I was not there. Surely all the sins of the fathers cannot be visited on one man? For I have seen the future, experienced the boils, drunk from the ocean of blood that even these invisible machines can't heal, and I know that these are the last days. Is it too late for me to repent? Has salvation's call come, and I have not heard it? It can't be too late. It can't."

The Preacher looked toward the heavens.

"Give me a sign, oh God. Speak to thy humble servant."

Nothing happened; neither sight nor sound intruded on their private tableau. Suddenly, the preacher began to cry, great crimson-marled tears staining the water. Jonas shouted through the ruddy haze, asking the Preacher when he first noticed the change from the real world, but he didn't respond — or didn't hear. Jonas wasn't sure which. Still sobbing, his cloud now marbled with teardrops, the Preacher swooped off toward the mountains, and through all the roar of his passing, no other sound was heard, no other sight was seen.

Hours seemed to pass while Jonas hovered over the lake, trying to assimilate what he had heard. At times he felt overloaded with information. He didn't know where to start. And yet, as much information as he had, he couldn't escape the thought that the most vital piece of knowledge, something that could help him understand what had happened and how to get out, would always be just out of reach.

The sun was now noticeably lower in the sky. Shortly it would be sunset. What would a sunset inside a computer system look like?

Jonas had just about decided to try Kaycee's screen when he heard a thumping noise. He looked off to the east. Nothing. The thumping grew louder and sounded like it was coming from the direction of the Sea-Tac Elevator. Jonas looked off toward the tower and noticed something in front of it, a small cloud coming toward him.

It chugged out toward the lake, the top of it continuously letting off small puffs that disintegrated as soon as they left the main body. The cloud was a coruscating carnival, every hue, tint, and tone in the rainbow flashed by, but always too fast to pin down an exact color.

Slowly the cloud came to a rest over the lake. Jonas thought he could hear the faint hum of gears as the cloud answered his thought-question.

"I was working downstairs on an invention. Had the parameters of the horizon figured out, but the gravitational stresses were causing me a problem. Twistor theory indicates a continuous flow, but the EPR paradox insists that some information is being exchanged. You see, the idea of action at a distance is central to the problem addressed by the Bell Inequality Theorem. I had about figured it out, and then the games and after them the malle-

ability of this place, the Other Side, took over. Oh, I eventually solved it, but I'm no dummy. I know this perpetual dreamlike state isn't real."

"What do you think caused the real world to vanish?"

"I hypothesize that it could be an astronomical event. Maybe the Earth passed through a strange cloud, or into an odd region of space where physical laws are different. Of course it could have been an alien attack. An alien computer virus smuggled into our bodies through the Multisys. How's that for a prelude to an invasion?"

"Fine, what do you think it is?"

"I don't know, but my guess would lie with the Multisys. I think it has made us susceptible in some as yet undetermined fashion. And now I surmise we might be trapped inside it. When we started altering our minds with advanced hypertexts and changed our bodies with nanoboosters, to say nothing of the damage caused by the terrorist activities of the Change Agents and their insidious replicators, we on the Earth were exposed. We never had the luxury of the active shields developed by the Stations. In the end we opened up more than Pandora's box."

"What are you planning to do?"

"Well, since everyone else is heading toward Mount Rainier, I believe I will join them. You see, this may be a twistor event caused by my experiment. I don't think so, but on the off chance, I want to see what's on the True Other Side. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few experiments to perform as I leave."

Jonas heard a terrible grinding noise, then the Scientist cursed. Finally the grinding noise stopped, and the Scientist's cloud thumped off.

As Jonas watched the slow progress of the Scientist's cloud chugging toward Mount Rainier, an overpowering bleakness, a suffocating numbness crept over him. Suddenly, he felt alone and afraid. He, too, wanted to know what the True Other Side — the life past Mount Rainier — was like.

Raising slowly above the houseboat, Jonas took one more look around at the esplanade, the marina, and the lake. Everything looked normal and empty. To the east no other clouds cluttered the sky; and to the west Greater Seattle remained a collection of fondly remembered skyscrapers dominated by the sky-straddling ribbon of the one true skyscraper, the beanstalk that reached all the way up to geosynchronous orbit: the Sea-Tac Orbital Elevator. A movement to the side of the Elevator caught his attention. Out over the waters of Puget Sound, a small cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, appeared out of nowhere and headed toward him.

He waited, wondering who this cloud might be, and what he should eventually do. He would either go to Mount Rainier or try the picture on the computer screen in the houseboat — and presumably on all the computer screens in this computerized vision of an accursed and doomed planet.

He found amusement in the realization that he, although trapped inside a

simulacrum of reality, still had options. Or did he? His body on the outside might be decaying into dust with every thought that coursed through his mind. Or had he already died and descended to this bizarre hell, designed for guilt-ridden architects?

Suddenly, the cloud swooped in from overhead and circled around him.

"You're from the outside?"

The voice sounded high, wispy, with a singsong rhythmic flow, yet it carried a sharpness and authority he hadn't heard since leaving the Islands; and he noticed, as this cloud spun, that it had an odd shape on one side.

The cloud circled two more times before stopping, and then rotated until the odd shape faced him.

Jonas gasped. The shape was that of a man, a haunted, tortured man with flat facial features lightly sketched in what Jonas recognized as the highly stylized Ukiyo-e floating worlds motif popular in the late Edo period in Japan.

"Your face," Jonas mumbled. What to say to a cloud that had a face? Before he could gather his thoughts, the face in the cloud spoke again. The pencil-thin mustache above the twin lines that substituted for lips twitched as it spoke. The lips didn't move at all.

"You are from the outside?"

"Yes. My name is Jonas Kernes. I'm an architect." He didn't know why he added that; everybody else in this *place*, wherever it was, felt a great need to identify themselves by their occupation. A last shred of reality to hold onto in the midst of cybernetic wilderness.

"My name is Hitori Kagashowa, and I too am an architect. I lived at Tamaguchi Station before I was grabbed. Now I want to know about you. We must get out of here. You came from the Puritan Islands, I'd guess. Did they grab you, too?"

For the first time since entering the Multisys, Jonas had the feeling he was talking to a real person.

"I came here and was trapped by my own curiosity. I wanted to find out what happened to Multisys humanity," he replied. "I still do. You're the first person I've met that seems to know where we are. Do you know what happened?"

"I have theories. The others in this section of the many-fractaled worlds of the Multisys have forgotten, stricken by the Mindwyrm, but then at the start they went willingly into that abyss. I didn't, and I know who I am and what was done to me."

"You said they went willingly. Didn't you also hook up to the Multisys?"

"No, I never submitted myself to the Multisys," the face replied.

"I heard that Tamaguchi Station was destroyed in a freak accident."

"A convenient story. I have no doubt that it was destroyed, but it was not an accident. It was a test pattern."

"A test pattern?"

"Yes, a test for what eventually destroyed over ninety per cent of the human race."

Hitori's cloud remained motionless.

Jonas felt confused. Hitori might know a lot, and then he might not. In any event Jonas wanted to get Hitori's ideas on what happened into some semblance of order in his mind.

"You said you had some theories. Why don't you tell them to me?"

"It all started back in the twentieth century, as most nasty realities about the twenty-first century do."

"Wait." Fear surged through Jonas. "Should we even talk about this? Won't whatever caused all this overhear us, or whatever constitutes hearing inside a computer system like the Multisys, and eliminate us — or worse?"

"It's possible," Hitori's words were deliberate and considered. "But unlikely. I believe that whatever caused this is either absent or has vacated the system altogether, although I can't tell you why. It's just that when Earth was swallowed up, the Mindwyrm program disappeared from this area and maybe all of the other areas inside the Multisys."

Fear leapt again into Jonas's mind, like a jungle cat dropping unseen from an overhead tree branch onto some unwary wayfarer foraging below. What if Hitori wasn't a man but an illusion? What if he were one of the Artificial Intelligences with which the Multisys united all human minds under its molecular roof? Or if he was telling the truth, might he not be stuck inside



here forever, a spinning dot of consciousness adrift on the silicon, sapphire, and diamond sea of the Multisys?

"I have no idea why that might be," Hitori continued.

"What?" Jonas was confused. His thought processes inside the Multisys were as confused as they used to be on the outside before the nanoboosters. "Could you repeat that?"

"My theory is simple," Hitori said, with just a trace of impatience in his voice. "I believe what befell me was the opening part of a very long form drama. Similar to Kabuki at the onset of the Genroko period. I had watched the principal performers from afar, safely, I thought, as they hatched their plans. I never thought they'd dare strike at me with their first test. I forgot the thought of the Dhaiku on defense matters: 'A smart enemy attacks his most dangerous foe first, before he can defend himself.' I responded too late. I underestimated their evil and their cunning."

Jonas saw a large puff of glittering black dots shoot from Hitori's cloud.

"And as you can see, it cost me my life."

"So the disappearances weren't the result of an alien invasion?"

"No, any aliens were simply a distraction. The disappearances were not the result of alien intervention; they were the result of the Mindwyrm."

"Who or what is the Mindwyrm?"

"No, the proper questions are: who constructed the Mindwyrm? What is it? How does it operate? And last of all, why? The last question is simple and yet crucial to everything that has happened. Even before the Change Plagues, right at the beginning of nanotech, certain writers foresaw that the development of a true molecular technology might pose a threat to the human race. They guessed that certain kinds of people might prove dangerous if they had control of such a transforming technology. They were right. Today these same kinds of people exist, and they think there are too many 'common' humans. The Mindwyrm is their way of evening the odds."

"If they're not aliens, who are they?"

"Human, very human, very old and very evil. I watched them over the years. I know them. It's why they hit our Station first. Tamaguchi Station was the edge of the wedge, a test laboratory, conveniently isolated from the rest of the human race and so perfect for their purposes: to test their devices and eliminate an adversary."

"We in the Puritan Islands are as much of an adversary," Jonas replied. "We should have been an even more likely target."

"No, you have weapons. You can hit back. You're dangerous. They haven't figured out a way to take you out without causing harm to themselves. They're probably working on that now. That's probably why their systems have shut down."

"So they are . . ." Jonas prodded.

"The ones behind the Multisys," Hitori finished his sentence. "Their identity is clear if you just think things through. The Multisys started as a

final response to the Change Plagues. Who started them?"

"The Change Agents? But it was simpleminded environmental terrorists that caused the Change Plagues. Although I vigorously opposed their methods and politics, most of the Change Plagues seemed to be as much political statements as anything, with the Change Agents using nanoviruses to cause unavoidable alterations in humans to show the folly of rigid thinking."

"Maybe they were simpleminded, but they changed humanity. Their name was not chosen by whim.

"But ask the next question. If you want to understand both the past and our present reality — or lack of it — you must always ask the next question."

"Which is?"

"Money. Who bankrolled the Change Agents? One of the partners in Tamaguchi Station was Electra Stylax. Do you remember Electra?"

"Yes, wasn't she media?"

"Right. An investigative talk-show host. She helped one of the Change Agents escape. He had a lot of suspicions and a little information; together they traced the funds all the way out to Charon Station."

"Charon Station. But I thought they were nothing more than a hideaway resort for the superwealthy and superconnected. Tahiti to the Stars, that sort of thing."

"Exactly. Who better to eliminate the overwhelming majority of humanity. After all, who needs hoi polloi, the lumpen proletariat, when you have nanotechnology?"

"Wait a minute. That's nineteenth-century mechanistic Marxist class-struggle junk. I don't like fascism, but I won't fall for its alternative."

"No, it's not Marxism, it's reality. Look at slavery. It existed throughout the entire Classical World. It's probably why Greece never invented technology, why the Ming Dynasty turned its back on the world."

"We won't mention the zero, algebra, or Arabic numerals." Jonas's sarcasm was lost on Hitori.

"Once machinery got a foothold, the reason for slavery disappeared and so, shortly, did slavery."

"Not to mention the thousands who died to free the slaves."

"Correct. But the mass of humanity was still necessary, not only for working in factories, but as consumers. Now, with nanotechnology, we're no longer necessary — in fact, we're in the way."

"I can't believe all rich people are like that."

"They aren't. They don't have to be. With nanotech all you need is a few people like that.

"And that brings us to the basic problem that these few wealthy crazies have with nanotech, which I believe caused everything. With nanotech what does it really mean to be rich? Longevity? Money? Freedom? We have the entire galaxy to choose from, or at least we should have. With nanotech everybody is truly rich, so the *truly rich* had to eliminate everybody or at

least in some way impoverish the rest of us to regain their status. It's all very primal Alpha Male monkey stuff, goes back a long way. In some ways it made us what we are as a species. Or were."

After hearing Hitori's dispassionate analysis, the one small part of Jonas left doubting Hitori doubted everyone and everything in the Multisys. The part about Alpha Males struck a chord in his mind, the memory of the youths hunting each other in the bizarre game of Scream and Cry.

The one thing about Hitori that reassured Jonas greatly was that he was an architect. He found the idea that the one person capable of helping him was another architect very satisfying, and in a self-serving way it made sense to him. Architects were used to designing and planning; who better to discern the patterns of a rather cold Machiavellian plan than another designer, another planner?

But that line of thought brought up the next nasty thought: what was Hitori thinking and planning?

Jonas asked him.

"I like to design elegant structures," Hitori replied. "Manipulate matter, not humanity. I prefer to observe from a distance. I want to know who's doing what to whom, not do it to them myself."

"Speaking of doing, other than eliminate or impoverish us, what was the purpose of the Multisys?"

"Simple. Change Plagues caused by the Change Agents; answer: the Multisys. All very neat. Set up a noise that drives the animals right where you want them. Hunters have been doing that for millennia."

Again came the subtle memory of the youths fanning out around the grove of trees.

"What about now?" Jonas asked. "Why the game and stuff in the children's area?"

"All I have are more theories. The Mindwyrm, through the Multisys, monitors the childlike humans trapped when the Mindwyrm, which acted as a virus program, grabbed the rest of Multisys humanity. It gives them conventional reference points in which to operate while it desensitizes them for another use."

"What use?"

"I'm not sure. Possibly simple research."

"What about this area? Why does it still have conventional reference points?"

"I suspect this is a transitional stage."

"To where?"

"I don't know, nor do I want to. I think from our point of view it is death."

"This doesn't make any sense," Jonas said, all the while afraid that what Hitori said made all too much sense.

"Agreed."

"Where are the rest of the people?" Jonas asked urgently.

"Mostly gone over to what they call the True Other Side. Only a few extroverts, most of whom you've met, are left. These are people with wills so strong that not even the Mindwyrm could destroy them, though I'm the only one that can truly remember the past, remember what it was like out there."

The face of the cloud looked skyward.

"Why only you?" Jonas demanded.

"I believe that one of the multiple virus programs in the Mindwyrm is designed to destroy or muddle past memories, particularly those memories before the disappearance. I was one of the first victims. Possibly, it wasn't fully operating when it grabbed me or I hadn't been fully prepared."

This was the time. He asked the single most important question for most of those living in the Puritan Islands. The most important question for him personally would have to wait. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer to it.

"How did this happen? How does the Mindwyrm grab people, causing them to disappear? How does it eliminate their bodies without destroying their minds?"

"Simple. It's through the nanoboosters that everybody takes. Nanotechnology operates through assemblers that operate at the atomic and molecular levels, structuring matter to precise atomic dimensions. They are hooked up to the Multisys that functions as a super hypertext, linking them with all human knowledge and theoretically all human activity at the speed of light. They receive the nanoboosts through it, probably by touching the computer screens that most of the homes are equipped with."

Jonas shuddered as he remembered touching the power switch to Kaycee's screen. The thought of uncontrolled nanovascular machines flooding through his body nauseated him.

"The ability to assemble atoms predicates an ability to disassemble them. I suspect that at some time in the past, probably under the cover of the Change Agents, a virus was injected into the nanovats. Remember that the charitable foundation that ostensibly owns Charon Station is the leading stockholder in General Nanotech. This virus was then fed into the blood of every human in the Multisys under the guise of the nanoboosts. Who would know the difference if one day you are fed a colorless glucose system that, in addition to penetrating through your body, eliminating all diseases, also prepares it for a predetermined signal that will disassemble your body molecule by molecule, atom by atom."

Jonas remembered that weeks passed before all of Multisys humanity was "grabbed." He asked Hitori about the lag.

"The timing of that signal was purely for the consumption of those watching on the Puritan Islands, probably to keep up the cover of an alien invasion."

Jonas thought of the reports of the oddly shaped Chinese lantern-like

spacecraft.

"Then, when the signal is given," Hitori continued, "the Multisys injects the Mindwyrm virus into the body that causes the nanoviruses to disassemble the human body into its component molecular parts, which are soon drying patches of water and dust in the wind."

"How about the mind? Why are people's minds still alive? Why do you remember everything — and is there a way to reverse the process, to reassemble those humans afflicted?"

"As I said, I believe it is because I was a test case. Somebody on Tamaguchi Station probably slipped the virus into my nanoboosters. Maybe their crude Multisys hookup didn't react correctly with the virus. In any case, I can think. As for the others, if you noticed the pictures in all of the houses, you saw that they all have the same fractal pattern. Fractals are part of the late twentieth-century science called chaos. It was all the rage for a while, then once Charon Station was established, reports of it disappeared from the media. Electra tried to do a show on it, but was stopped cold. It was her interest that got me started in researching all of this."

Hitori's cloud spun slowly around once and stopped.

"Chaos scientists started dying in mysterious accidents or vanishing altogether."

"Early victims of the Mindwyrm?"

"I don't think so. I think they were kidnapped. No offense, but I think someone didn't want the science of chaos combined with nanotech at any more sophisticated a level than what you do in your architectural work. It is what I was working on in my spare time on Tamaguchi — of which I had plenty. Anyway, fractals deal with an area in chaos theory called strange attractors."

Jonas interrupted, "Given our current circumstances, that is a bizarrely appropriate name."

"Strange attractors," Hitori continued, as if he hadn't heard Jonas's interruption, "are the oddly ordered result when order turns to chaos, when uniform action devolves into turbulence. I believe they hold the key to how our minds work and why they are different from Artificial Intelligences. I also believe that the pictures were a way of trapping the minds of those hooked into the Multisys. I know it was the appearance of such a strange attractor that caused me to become trapped where we are."

"And where is that?"

"We are certainly stored as data in the Multisys. I suspect that the strange attractor operates in all the areas the Multisys does. I was grabbed out on the edge of the Solar System. You on Earth."

"Why are the standard references those of Earth?"

"I wasn't aware we were on Earth."

"What do you see?"

"The blackness of space. It is only our minds that are linked."

"How about the game? I was in the game with the boy."

"Were you?"

"Well, you mentioned standard references for the childlike ones or some such statement."

"How do you know that you were looking at what the boy saw?"

"Good point. But what about my hovercar?"

Jonas told Hitori about his hovercar and how it had disappeared when he left the real world.

"It is possible," Hitori responded, "that the Multisys has designed reference points for all of us, and your car wasn't there when it assembled the data."

"Where are our minds?"

"I suspect they are stored as data right where the program that disincorporated us was hatched: Charon Station."

"Why?"

"Security purposes. Back-up capabilities are greatest there — that is, there are real humans in the loop."

"Another good point. So, presuming I get out of there, how do we in the Puritan Islands get everybody back?"

"I'm not sure you can. But if a program exists to disassemble, another program to assemble, containing all the information necessary to reconstitute our bodies, must surely exist, and it is probably on Charon as well. Such abilities were foreseen before nanotech ever existed.

"What I'm worried about is the people who have left for the True Other Side. I don't know that they can be rescued. In which case all that would be left are the childlike ones playing the game and us extroverts."

"Even if only one of you can be saved, it is enough," Jonas said, thinking of Kaycee.

He asked about her, and Hitori replied that since he hadn't run into anyone who remembered his name, finding her would be hard. He asked Jonas to describe her and her hobbies, and when Jonas mentioned that she liked to paint, Hitori paused before answering.

"There is one person who I've heard lives on the edge of the True Other Side, where she paints the openings to it. If you search for her, beware of straying too close to the True Other Side, for that is where the Artificial Intelligences — also trapped by the Mindwyrm — reside. I believe they are the Guardians of the Void — or of the dead, it all depends on your point of view."

"I guess it does," Jonas replied dourly.

Hitori's voice, which had been calm, boomed out now. "Just remember me if you get out. If you don't get out, I'll be here. If you return, I'll be here. No matter what, I'll be here."

Lost in his own thoughts, not sure if he could ever find a way out, Jonas didn't notice Hitori's cloud leave, but when he looked up, Hitori was gone.

His thoughts turned to Kaycee. Where would she go to paint the edge — providing that the painter Hitori had mentioned was indeed her? Jonas could think of only one place that the extroverts had mentioned: Mount Rainier.

The trip, if that is what it was, given the subjective nature of life inside the Multisys, took a very short time. Jonas circled higher and higher over Lake Washington until he could see not only Mount Rainier, but the tips of all the major Cascade mountains: Baker to the north; Adams, Hood, Jefferson, and volcanic St. Helens to the south. He flew toward Rainier until the snow-capped summit spread out below him, all smooth-looking like an ice cream cone destined for some giant mouth. In the real world, scores of climbers had fallen to their deaths on its jagged edges or into its treacherous crevasses.

No cloud darkened the clear blue sky. Jonas searched and found nothing that looked like an edge leading to the True Other Side. He didn't know what to expect, a pit of some sort maybe, straight from the mind of some modern day Dante, complete with a medieval carnival of horrors associated with the netherworld. Or perhaps it would be the dark and foreboding river Styx, with its lonely boatman slowly plying the swift and sinister currents of the river, efficiently ferrying the souls of the dead to their proper residence. He wondered if those who named Pluto's moon Charon and those who built the Station that shared its name had any sense of irony.

Then, as if in response to his thoughts, a small hole opened up on a ridge overlooking the summit, revealing a crack of white-hot molten lava. The lava spewed upward in a huge fountain of flame. A dark orange stream flowed down the mountain, staining its purity. Jonas stared at the hole — and at what came out of it. He couldn't discern its shape or color, since the eruptions of lava obscured most of it from view. Finally it emerged from the fire, and he could see the whole creature — for this was no cloud personality.

Two huge circular blades whirled above a precise cube and two more blades whirled below and two more on each of its four sides. The blades weren't connected to the cube-shaped body, but moved with it. The blades were the color of burnished steel. The body was of clearest crystal, its facets gleaming, reflecting fragments of sunlight. He tried to shield his eyes, to turn away, but he couldn't.

This creature had to be one of the Artificial Intelligences. Jonas couldn't think of any other possibility. Everything about the creature suggested a cybernetic birth: its lines were all harsh and straight, no softness, no smooth edges marred their machined beauty, and no sign of its passage through the lava stained the shining edges. Suddenly, a thunderous sound like the blast of a thousand trumpets pealed forth from it. A great jagged tear opened in the sky. Another blast of sound, deeper, like the thud of a bass guitar, and the sky was rent nearly in two; through the rip Jonas saw only utter blackness — but as his eyes adjusted, he saw countless twinkling lights: the stars. The

blackness was the blackness of space. Jonas stared in awe as the creature, blades whirling faster until they were a spinning blur that hurt his eyes, ascended through the rip in the sky and disappeared.

Jonas let out a gust of air. Whatever it was, Artificial Intelligence or not, he had felt nothing from it. It looked hard and sparkling, projecting no personality.

Below, the lava had stopped pouring out, and Jonas noticed what appeared to be a long tunnel. He moved closer and hovered over the tunnel. At the edge of the tunnel, a patch of blue bubbled up from inside the mountain and splattered onto the side of the ridge untouched by the still glowing lava flows.

Jonas moved closer to the tunnel. Inside it — he couldn't tell how far down — he saw a cloud hovering in the center of the shaft, globules of color arcing out from it, staining the sides. Jonas felt hope swell in him.

He flew down the smooth-edged circular opening until he hovered over the paint-splotched cloud.

"I've never seen such a tattered unkempt cloud before. No color, no tightness. How'd you last this long?" The voice was medium-pitched, but sharp. Jonas recognized that voice, or at least imagined that he did. It had to be Kaycee, or what was left of her. Her cloud, from what Jonas could make of it in this poor light, was a large color wheel. From the edges of the cloud, globules of color splashed against the walls of the tunnel in a mishmash of colors. Occasional droplets of paint fell back on her cloud, and he moved up the tunnel to avoid being hit.

"It's you, Kaycee." He didn't really know what to say. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, Jonas, it's me, although I don't know why I remember. It's been such a long time. It must be your presence. You always caused me to remember things I wanted to forget. Why did you return?"

"I've asked myself that over and over again, trapped in this computerized model of reality. I guess for a sense of personal absolution — and because I owe you another attempt at —"

He stopped talking, but knew as soon as the words were out that they were a pompous mistake.

"— at rescuing me," she replied, completing his sentence. "Now the picture is complete. Jonas Kernes, the same as always, arrives, smug and self-righteous, more concerned with salving his own ego than with what other people really want."

"That's not fair."

"You're right. It's an opinion, but then everything's an opinion. A wise old man once said that 'truth depends on the way you view it.' Freedom is the same. One person's freedom from another point of view is license. When will you understand that freedom begins outside of yourself? That not everyone views life the same way as you do?"

"How much freedom did I have when you and others like you turned the

Earth into one mind-net linked together by the Multisys?"

"You were given the freedom to leave."

"Great." Jonas didn't want to argue. He asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm painting the Edge."

Her response was mumbled, but at least it wasn't hostile. Encouraged, Jonas tried another question.

"What Edge?"

"The Edge of Reality."

"Oh." He didn't know if he wanted to dwell on that further. Maybe one more question to satisfy his curiosity, and then he had to find out what happened to her and whether she wanted to leave — assuming they could leave. "What's that?"

"The edge of where we are on this plane of reality and what we're evolving toward."

"And what is that?"

"The True Other Side. Beyond death, where all is happiness. No one truly dies. Everybody evolves. It's exhilarating and happy. I can sense those on the True Other Side. They're happy, truly happy. It's all right to be happy, isn't it?"

Her words brought memories of the first time they had met bubbling to the surface of his mind. It was at an open-house party of a large law firm. Neither of them knew anybody else there, so they gravitated together. Kaycee sampled the free champagne rather frequently and at one maudlin point in the evening had asked him rather plaintively, "It's all right to be happy, isn't it?" He had fallen in love with her. He had seen the soft, sensitive side beneath the rather harsh exterior she adopted for her job. In the months after they broke up, he thought it was because he had always felt for wounded birds and other small animals. But that was his anger thinking for him. Kaycee was neither, and Jonas realized that his image of her had never matched the reality. How odd to discover reality amongst unreality. He almost laughed.

"Everybody said we had nothing in common besides a physical attraction," he said. "Now we don't have even that."

"Everybody was right."

"Maybe they were. Why don't the others remember who they are?" He decided not to mention Hitori.

"They don't want to. Why should they? Names mean nothing where we're heading."

"But you remember your name — and mine." Jonas had hoped that she might be able to help him or at least allow him to try to help her, but he now knew that it was wishful thinking. Still he was going to try. He had to try.

"It's painful, but then when I remember pain, I remember you, Jonas Kernes."

"That's cruel."

"Is it? Or is it crueler to remind me of what I used to be, not where I'm going and what I'm going to become?"

Her cloud quit dripping color and spun down the tunnel for a second before stopping.

"And where are you going?"

"The True Other Side, like the old song says, 'The True Other Side, a result to be devoutly desired, take a chance on the True Other Side of life.' The twentieth-century philosophers were wrong: love is not the drug, life is the drug."

"How can you say that? After all, if you like the True Other Side so much, why aren't you there?"

"Because I wasn't ready. I am ready now."

"Why?"

"The picture is complete. You're here. Sooner or later, I knew you'd come. Now I can leave. I thought it only poetic that this time I'd be the one to leave."

Jonas suddenly felt tired, lifeless, limp. "Don't go, Kaycee."

"Why, I am tired of this artifice."

"We needn't live an artificial life. That's what I tried to tell you back then." He fumbled for words. "The Puritan Islands still value humanness. Please return with me. Please. I love you."

"I know." Her voice was soft, not tender, but not harsh. "I'm sorry, I must go."

Jonas felt like crying, but couldn't cry; he had no eyes.

"Promise not to forget me." Her cloud moved closer to him. "Please don't let me leave before you tell me that."

Jonas hesitated. One part of him wanted to tell her that he could never forget her, that she had a place in his mind nothing could erase, but another part objected because it would sound as if he agreed with her decision. He said nothing.

Her cloud spiraled down the tunnel.

Startled, he followed — and for a second he caught up with her and flew in front of her cloud.

"I love you. I won't forget you, I promise. Please don't go."

But if she heard him, she gave no sign or response. Her dive down into the tunnel would shut him out of her life forever.

Finally he fell behind. Her cloud vanished down into the darkness.

On his return he tried to find the splotches of color she left on the walls, but he couldn't.

Mount Rainier was as serene and pristinely white as ever when he returned to the sky. No sign of the lava or Kaycee's colors stained the slopes, and when he looked back, he saw the tunnel was still there, but much smaller.

He looked overhead. The rip was still there, but vanished as he headed toward it.

He stopped, unsure of where to go or what to do or how long he had hovered over Mount Rainier, when he heard a boom above him. He looked up and saw another one of the cubes descending toward him. Its body was amber, not clear. He moved out of the way, and its blades barely missed him as they descended to the summit of Mount Rainier. It hovered over the tunnel, blades spinning in the air. The tunnel disappeared. Then it moved back up toward him.

Jonas never knew what impulse made him grab onto one of the blades as it went past. But he held on as the cube and its accompaniment of blades headed toward the sky, even though he could feel the blade ripping his cloud apart. He heard the trumpets roar and the deep bass boom and saw the rip in the sky coming closer and closer — and then all he felt was pain, unending pain. Then the pain ceased, and a cold, hard, sharp-edged thought penetrated through to his mind.

"RESCUE US."

He didn't hear a voice, just felt a thought. He had never experienced anything like that. The thought penetrated his mind. He felt the world become small and distant. Was this thing truly one of the Artificial Intelligences inhabiting the Multisys? Had it been trapped here, along with most of humanity? Could a machine understand freedom? Had it and others like it known he was here all along?

Then the pain returned and he lost consciousness.

When he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his back, Jonas knew that he had made it all the way out to the real world. He had felt pain in the Multisys, but this pain was different, localized, real. He opened his eyes. Everything was a mass of blurry figures. He closed his eyes and opened them again. This time everything was clear. He could see Dr. Ericks's face over him, and he could see Therese and the rest of the team clustered behind the doctor. Ericks glanced at him, looked down at the readout on the diagnostic scanner, then over at Therese. Jonas tried to get up, but felt weak and slumped back onto the ground.

"Lie still for a few minutes," Ericks said, favoring him with a brief smile. "It'll take the vasculars that much time to check for any damage."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jonas noticed Therese holding her breath. He looked over at her, but she avoided his glance, stood up, and walked away.

He felt very tired.

It was another six hours before Jonas felt strong enough to walk. Shortly after that, he and Ericks got on the Elevator.

From his bed Jonas had told the team what had happened to him, omitting the part about Kaycee; that was personal and private. They still weren't

certain why he was still alive. They had tried to revive him when they first found him, but he hadn't responded. Finally he revived by himself, screaming and yelling. It took almost the entire team to control him and a strong sedative to put him to sleep. The next time he woke he appeared tired, but normal.

By the time they finished examining him and listening to his story, preparations were already underway on the Puritan Islands to outfit an exploratory unmanned probe to pass by Charon Station. It was the first step in what might be a full invasion, if Hitori was right.

Feeling the pull as the Elevator tugged them into space, Jonas didn't care. He just wanted some time alone — some time to rest.

"How are you?"

Jonas looked out at the stars. A myriad of thoughts crashed back and forth through his mind like the waves of some synaptic ocean.

Ericks asked him again, before Jonas could focus enough to give a simple answer.

"I'm here."

"What about the rest of those on Earth?"

"The secret to their salvation lies on Charon Station."

"Great, well at least we know who the enemy is," Ericks replied, yet to Jonas it seemed like the doctor was trying to convince himself as much as anybody.

Jonas looked away, then spun around, the sudden motion made him dizzy. Anger at Ericks's naivete and at those who created the Mindwyrm surged through him.

"Yes, now we know who the enemy is, and if we get lucky and rescue those on Earth, they might make it back." Jonas lowered his voice. "But what kind of life will they have? Imagine, none of them will really be human, just large collections of cooperating nanomachines. Their real bodies are dust."

Ericks looked at him and then out toward the stars.

"Are we any more than that? After all, we're just a collection of cooperating pieces of DNA, and DNA manipulation led to nanotech. Their cells are just more organized than ours are, that's all."

"I thought about that while I was floating along as a bit of information in the Multisys, and we are more than that, we have to be." He broke off, thinking about Kaycee, with that last image of her disappearing in the darkness stuck in his mind. "We have to be."

A sudden shift signaled the ride up to geosynch orbit was almost finished.

Jonas stared at his face in the mirror-smooth back door of the Elevator. The face that stared back at him seemed calm, impassive, but the eyes had a haunted look that wasn't there before the trip back to Earth. He thought to himself that he looked like a man who had stared down the flight lines of eternity and come away with a severe case of vertigo.

"What about Kaycee, did you find her?"

Ericks's question jarred him.

"Yes," he replied, his voice flat and dull.

"Is she all right?"

"No."

"She's coming back, if we can get them back, isn't she?"

"No, she won't be coming back."

"What happened?"

"I'd rather not discuss it."

Ericks looked over at him, worry lines showing through his nano-enhanced youthful features.

"What about you?"

"Huh?" Jonas looked up and saw Ericks's concern, and for the first time since he returned, he actually felt the world becoming real again, as if he were finally awake after a horrible nightmare, except the nightmare was all too real, and Kaycee was gone — forever. With all of eternity to choose from, she chose death. Why? When he first moved to the Puritan Islands, he had hoped time would cauterize the wounds, but seeing her once more, if only the essence of what she once was locked up inside of a machine, had flayed them open again.

"What about you?" Ericks persisted. "Are you back?"

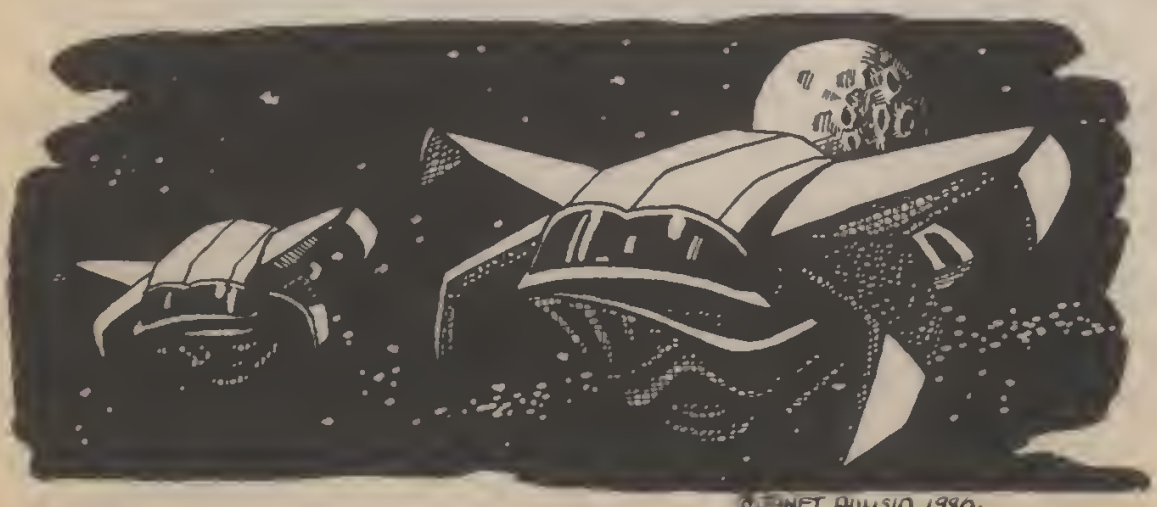
Jonas looked up at Ericks, then out at the stars. "I hope so," he replied, then turned away as tears formed in his eyes.

His back against a rock, Jonas was installing more illuminants when he heard a noise behind him in the brush. A lone figure walked up to the rock.

"Room for one more?"

Jonas moved over and tried to smile. Therese leaned against the rock.

For a while, the two of them stood there looking at the waters of the lake play tag with the sand on the shoreline. Finally, he put his hand over hers. She leaned against his shoulder, and together they watched as the biosphere passed into night, stars lit up the sky, and the lights from the illuminants sprouted around the lake. ✿



DOG'S LIFE
by Martha Soukup
art: Brad W. Foster

Martha Soukup has recently moved to San Francisco, where she lives in Lower Haight, which "is an interesting neighborhood where you can buy miniskirts made out of used inner tubes or have any part of your body pierced," she claims.

"Dog's Life" is her third story sale to Amazing® Stories. *Martha tells us that this is "the oddest story I've written — and I think that's saying something." Her other stories that have appeared in our pages are "Dreams of Sawn Ivory (May 1989) and "Over the Long Haul" (March 1990).*

"You're *what*?" asked Angela.

Herb, a large, dusty-beige dog, sat beside a cardboard box that contained the few items — a bone, a catnip mouse, a couple of worn blankets — that the animals agreed they could rightfully claim as theirs. The Siamese, Wayfarer, lay curled atop it.

"We're moving out," Herb said. Wayfarer gave a triumphant flick of her tail.

"But why?"

"Animals," said Martin. "Don't have an ounce of gratitude."

"*Gratitude*," Wayfarer sneered. "Gratitude for being locked up in this dingy house when there are cats out there I have a right to see? Gratitude for being fed brown sludge from a can? Gratitude, I imagine, for being thrown bodily out of any chair I happen to be napping in if some human being wants it instead?"

"So who bought that chair? Who bought that food?"

"Martin," said Angela warningly. She turned to the animals. "Wayfarer, Herb, I'm sure we can work this out. Let's talk about this."

"The time for talking is through. What reason is there for four-footed animals to be subservient to two-footed? It's slavery," she said cooly, her tail describing a figure eight in the air.

"Do you feel that way, too?" Angela asked the dog.

Herb looked away. "I think she's right," he said, "that there's something wrong about living like this. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Herb —"

"No hard feelings," the dog said gruffly. He nosed the box forward. Angela looked at him helplessly. "Um, could I trouble you to open the door?"

"Be my *guest*," Martin said, yanking it open with an obsequious gesture

out. Angela reached out a hand to stroke the dog's ear, but pulled it back, watching as Wayfarer rode the carton of worldly possessions Herb pushed down the street.

"We should have thought this out more," Wayfarer complained.

We? thought Herb, since it all had been the cat's idea, but he kept it to himself. Instead, he pulled the blankets out of the box and arranged them as best he could behind a dumpster. Shivering in the autumn chill, he tried to sleep, Wayfarer providing the only spot of warmth where she pressed against his flank.

At dawn Herb woke from a fitful doze to find a ragged, spotted mongrel sniffing at him. "Morning," said the strange dog. "What's a couple pets like you doing out on the street?"

"How'd you know?" Herb mumbled.

"Hmm what?"

"How can you tell we're pets?"

The mongrel looked amused. "Collars," he said.

"Oh," said Herb.

"So?" said the spotted dog. Wayfarer gave a sleeping snort and rolled over. "What happened — kicked out?"

"No — our decision."

The mongrel shook his head. "Pretty dumb. You gave up a roof and a meal ticket to eat out of garbage cans?"

Herb had been considering that, but he drew himself up — trying not to waken the cat — and said, stiffly, "We declared independence. It's a political statement. Humans and dogs — and cats — can't relate honestly until we meet on an equal level." He strained his head around, chewed at his loose collar, tore it off, and flung it to the asphalt.

"Wow," said the mongrel. "No kidding? Then you got guts, kid."

Herb doubted it, but it felt good to hear. "Thanks."

"Maybe not brains, though." Herb blinked. "Incidentally, this is my alley. Find yourself other crash space tomorrow night." The spotted dog made a quick deposit against the brick wall and trotted off.

"Tuna?" murmured Wayfarer in her sleep. "No, I'll have the salmon mousse."

Herb could — just barely — make himself root through a garbage can and pretend it was table scraps, but Wayfarer always demanded the best of whatever he found. "Siamese have delicate digestions," she said primly in a voice that allowed no argument.

It wasn't the food that bothered Herb, or trying to sleep without freezing or being run off by former occupants. He felt like a deadbeat.

"*I* need time to recover from my deep-rooted trauma," Wayfarer said when he brought it up. "Anyway, if we're really declaring independence


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from an inequitable system, there's no reason to play by its rules."

Herb was stubborn. Leaving Angela and Martin to be his own dog meant assuming his own responsibilities. And winter was coming on.

"You gotta be kidding," said the security chief.

"Please, sir," said Herb. "You're the first employer I've been able to get through to. Give me a chance."

"Canines ain't independents," said the chief. "Ain't done."

"I'll work cheap. I'll earn any responsibility you give me."

"How cheap?"

"Less than minimum wage," Herb offered desperately. "I'm not a human — it's legal."

"True," said the chief.

"And you can get rid of me if you aren't satisfied. I don't have a union and I don't need a contract."

"Good, 'cause I don't sign contracts with mutts."

Wayfarer expressed disappointment at his joining the system but didn't reject the one-room, no-bath apartment Herb found. The landlady looked dubious, but took the cash. "Just till I get real people for it." With what she charged for the dingy hole, that was as unlikely as the animals getting an actual lease. Still, there was money left over for Herb to buy generic dry dog food and the expensive single-serving food and occasional fresh fish Wayfarer demanded for her digestion.

Herb suggested the cat try to clean the place up while he was at work. Somehow it seemed he ended up doing most of the heavy work.

"You're much better suited for it," she commented, grooming her whiskers.

"What does that mean?" he demanded, losing his patience.

"You're bigger — you're stronger — you have a better constitution. And you're more temperamentally suited to unimaginative work."

He struggled to remind himself they were fellow oppressed creatures, and nothing could come without a little sacrifice.

And he did enjoy the pride he felt, supporting himself, beholden to no one. He liked working for a living.

"Sorry," said the chief. "This came outta management. Not my idea."

"But I've worked hard! I've never missed a day! I'm the best guard at the factory — canine or human!"

"I wouldn't say that was wrong. But it ain't the point."

"Look," said Herb. "I don't even know where that came from." The human-interest section of the newspaper between them bore the headline, ANIMAL RIGHTS? and the subhead, TWO "DECLARE INDEPENDENCE" FROM HUMANITY. There was a picture of Wayfarer looking soberly into the distance, head raised nobly. There was also a small, fuzzy old shot of himself leaping for a frisbee, one of the few mementos Herb had brought from

Angela's house. "I never talked to any reporters."

"It's lousy publicity for the company. We don't need trouble."

Herb got home before dawn to find a box on the sidewalk in front of their building. On the box was Wayfarer. Her tail blurred with motion.

"That rotten — *human*," she said, and hissed. "She's evicted us! Said she runs a quiet building. Hah! *That's* a joke. Where is she at three A.M., when all the radios are blasting?"

Herb dropped the moist newspaper in front of Wayfarer. "What do you know about this?" he asked her.

Wayfarer glanced at it. "Oh, that. The picture's not too bad, is it? I think my other side is better."

"Did you talk to that reporter?"

"Why not? I've got nothing else to do all day," Wayfarer said. "This neighborhood doesn't have a very good class of cats," she added critically.

"It got me fired!" Herb said. "Don't you think you could have consulted with me first?"

The cat stared at him. "You don't own me," she said coldly. "Did I escape the domination of human beings to take orders from a dog?"

"I'm sorry," Herby said awkwardly.

"All right, I'll accept that. What's for dinner?"

Wayfarer refused to sleep on the street again. Herb had exactly twenty-seven dollars. The hotel they found wanted ten dollars a night for a room that made their previous quarters look palacial; Herb had a piece of work talking Wayfarer into accepting the room. "We can't afford anything better. We can only pay for two nights as it is."

"So get another job," she said.

Most places still outright refused to talk to a dog. Others glared. "You're that troublemaker, aren't you?" Word seemed to have gotten to all the firms that used guard dogs, and he couldn't think of other work to try for.

The second day was worse. Street animals were no friendlier than the humans. "Life's rough enough without muzzy-head idealists like you rocking the boat!" a little three-legged terrier called angrily at him. And there were no jobs available, not even interviews.

Dejected, he walked back to the hotel, five dollars in his pouch.

Wayfarer was not alone. "Mr. Herb Canis, I presume?" the man with the briefcase said, extending a hand.

"Canis?" said Herb. He shook hands, which made him feel vaguely foolish, as though he were rolling over. A card appeared in the man's hand, and Herb took it in his mouth.

"Canis," said Wayfarer. "We can hardly go by Norlander, can we? Names are identities, the selves we show the world. And 'Wayfarer Norlander' sounds ridiculous. I considered changing 'Wayfarer,' but I've dignified that name by making it my own and taken 'Felis' for a surname, as an example to

felines everywhere."

"She has quite a message, doesn't she?" said the man. "And the style and conviction to get it across."

"This isn't another reporter, is it?" asked Herb. "Wayfarer, we've had enough trouble."

"Hardly," said the man, with a polite little laugh. "If you'd look at my card —"

Herb dropped it on the floor and read "Foster Roderick, Flair Public Relations."

"I have engaged Ms. Felis on Oprah and Donahue, and I'm working on Letterman." Wayfarer stretched contentedly on the satin cushion Herb had bought her with his first paycheck.

"What? So fast?"

Roderick said, "I had the bookings yesterday evening. The only catch was finding Ms. Felis and yourself — you see what a good p.r. firm can accomplish. Getting you to the top will be trivial by comparison."

"Us?"

"I speak of you as compatriots, of course. You do realize, though, that it's Ms. Felis —"

"You may call me Wayfarer, Foster," she purred.

"Wayfarer has a quality. She'll be beautifully telegenic. She'll just leap from the screen." He looked Herb over. "You — well, you have a certain blue-collar charm, I'd say. We might be able to do something with you later. But let's start with Wayfarer, don't you think?"

"Sure," said Herb, dazed.

•

A limo picked Wayfarer up for her first interview. A limo drove them, days later, to their new Michigan Avenue condo. Wayfarer jetted around the country, and Herb stayed home and watched her on television.

The networks ran stories covering pet-store picketings, Wayfarer providing commentary. Animal rights bills were introduced. Shelters for street animals and disaffected pets sprang up. Wayfarer T-shirts flooded department stores, one of the many rights to her image Roderick had sold.

Herb had nothing to do.

He slipped out of the building one day and took himself for a walk. He was a little concerned he'd be recognized as Wayfarer's partner, but he wasn't. He walked for an hour before he realized he was headed for the office where Angela worked. *No big deal,* he told himself; *the odds of running into anyone downtown are tiny.*

So it took three hours before Angela walked down the street.

She drew up short and looked at him. Finally she said, "Herb."

"Hi."

"So, um, what are you doing downtown?"

"Nothing much. Window-shopping."

"Okay." There was an awkward silence.

"Hey, um, I know what Wayfarer's been saying about you and Martin on TV. I just want you to know those are her opinions, not mine."

"Sure," said Angela. "The enemy always has to be made out to be a monster to get the fight going. I know."

"Well, I know it can't have made things easy for you two."

"Herb," she said. "Maybe you should know Martin and I split up."

"Why?" he asked, surprised.

"Oh, you know, he wasn't the most sensitive guy in the world. House got awfully quiet after. . . ." She trailed off.

"Yeah."

"You wouldn't want to move back?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh, gosh, Angela, that's really nice of you, but —"

"I'm sorry. It was a stupid question."

"It just wouldn't be right."

"Sure," said Angela. Dog and woman stared at each other. "Look, I'd better get going. We'll get together sometime, all right?"

"Sure," said Herb.

The Loop was crowded with humans. Herb found himself retreating to the alleys. He didn't feel like going back to the empty condo, not even with all the plush cushions scattered through all the rooms and the fabulously stocked kitchen. Not a one of those cushions, he thought, silk or satin or velvet, was as comfortable as the beat-up old armchair Angela kept in the den for him.

Did I ask to be a symbol? he thought. Maybe he did. *You have to be awful careful in this life.* He sat down by a dumpster to ponder.

"Hey, this is my turf," growled a voice. Herb looked up, and the voice became warmer. "Oh, it's you. Herb, right?"

"Yes," he confirmed to the spotted mongrel.

"Didn't guess I was talking to future celebrities, way back when. Guess you were smarter than I thought."

"Maybe not," Herb said morosely.

"What's your problem? You got fame and fortune without doing squat. That snotty little cat friend of yours does it all."

"I don't think she minds," Herb said.

"Going on Carson and eating caviar? No, probably not. Just like a cat." The mongrel paused, then allowed, "Well, maybe not all of them."

"It's like Wayfarer, though, I guess. But it's for a good cause," Herb said defensively. "It calls attention to social problems. She's living a very fulfilling life."

"You're not?" the mongrel asked. "Christ, you've got all the money in the world. You can eat anything you want. You don't need to keep fighting folks out of your sleeping space. Sounds great to me."

"I hate it!" Herb cried. "I don't *do* anything. I was working before, and that was better."

"So get a job."

"I'm kind of too famous to be a watchdog now. What else can I do?"

"Get into investments. Real estate — that's always good," the spotted dog said sagely. He cocked an eye. "You don't look excited."

"It's —" Herb paused. "I don't know how to say this. I liked the way I lived before."

"Ah," said the mongrel.

"I ran into my old mistress today, and she invited me back. But I can't do that. I'll be known as a Fido! I couldn't live with myself either, if I backed down from a moral decision."

"Yep."

"So what should I do?"

"How the hell do I know?" said the mongrel. "I got problems of my own. And unless you got some food to share, I got business."

"Thanks a lot," Herb said to the empty alley.

"You want a job?" Wayfarer said. "No problem. Why didn't you say something before?"

"When were you around to talk to?"

"We can arrange something. Let me see — there've been some threats recently. We can find room for Herb with the bodyguards, can't we, Foster?" she said to the manager, interrupting his phone call.

"Mmm? Oh, sure."

"How's that, Herb? Put Herb on the payroll, Foster."

The manager jotted a note.

"One other thing, Wayfarer."

"Could you make it fast? My personal groomer will be here soon."

"I'd like to invest some of the money."

Foster Roderick looked up. "Ms. Felis's money?"

"I thought this was a partnership."

"Certainly any 'partnership' — of which there is no legal existence — is more than fulfilled by your excellent room and board here."

Herb took a deep breath. "I supported Wayfarer —"

Roderick snorted. "Hardly at this level!"

"And whether or not there's anything *legal,* I think —"

"I have to protect Ms. Felis's interests —"

The buzzer sounded. "That's my groomer," said Wayfarer stiffly.

"Of course," said Herb. He rose with great dignity.

"He probably wouldn't cost that much to buy off," he heard Wayfarer tell Roderick as the door swung shut behind him.

So he became one of Wayfarer's personal bodyguards. He followed her

around and stared at anyone who got too close. Wayfarer didn't like anyone to get too close.

When she traveled, humans, not Herb, traveled with her. When Wayfarer was on a lecture circuit out of Chicago, he studied how to invest the little parcel of money she had allowed him, shopping rental properties and studying commodities.

He felt a little better. But still lonely.

One of Wayfarer's bodyguards broke his leg two hours before a flight, with no time to replace him. "You don't mind, do you, Herb?"

Not only had Herb never been on an airplane, he had never dreamed of flying first-class. He was nervous about flying, but excited.

Wayfarer said he was to board to check out the cabin. They were late to the airport, and there was some confusion, until Roderick explained the situation to the boarding attendant.

The first-class cabin was nearly full, the flight attendants preoccupied with a screaming set of triplets in back, and Herb didn't know how to find his seat. He turned to a matronly woman sitting on the aisle. "Pardon me, ma'am, could you —?"

The woman shrieked. "My god, a wolf!"

The man sitting behind her said, "Calm down. It's only a mangy dog. Stewardess! Stewardess, a dog has wandered onto the plane."

"Get that thing out of here," someone else said. "I'm allergic. I paid good money to have a good seat on this plane. What is this airline coming to? I'm writing a letter!"

"No, I have a — ouch!" The allergic man had swatted him with the in-flight magazine. Herb's ticket fell from his pouch and was trampled.

Wayfarer strolled onto the plane. "Herb, what is going on here?"

The matronly woman turned. "Oh, my, you're — you're — you're that famous one, aren't you? I have your book in my purse!"

"Wayfarer Felis," supplied the allergic man.

"This is terrible," the woman said. "A celebrity on board and this scruffy beast causing trouble! He could eat her! I'll complain to the airline for you, dear. You will autograph my book, won't you?"

"That dog is my traveling companion," Wayfarer said.

"Oh — my —"

"I can see I have a long way to go in my mission to bring animals to full legal stature." Everyone looked respectfully chastened.

A steward hurried up, Herb's ticket was found, and he was seated beside Wayfarer with many apologies. Wayfarer looked coldly at him. "You should have handled it," she hissed under her breath, then smiled at the matronly woman and autographed her book with a pawprint.

There was caviar for Wayfarer. The flight attendants were polite, even deferential, to Herb, but it seemed everyone wanted to pretend he didn't exist. Wayfarer didn't say another word to him.

Herb resigned before she could fire him. He talked to a lawyer, who talked to Roderick; a week later, he put his pawprint on a release from any future demands on Wayfarer and took the check she wrote him in return without a word.

Managing a six-unit apartment building was hard work. On a typical day he might take a shoulder to Mrs. Fox's stuck window, vacuum the front steps with the vacuum hose in his mouth, drain the muck from the hot-water heater, mediate a dispute between across-the-hall neighbors, grant the young dance student a week extension on her rent, take out the trash, and call the plumber about the Prokopiaks's toilet. The roach problem would be getting worse again, the neighborhood kids throwing beer bottles on the front lawn, and the gutters developing a leak.

He was exhausted. He was deeply satisfied.

And every night at 11:30, he would look both ways, sneak up the stairs and across the hall to apartment 2-B, and snuggle under the blankets at the feet of his tenant — Angela Norlander.

It was a dog's life. He could deal with it. ✪



HEIR TO PHOENIX

Born within rubescent shadows
sucked sanguine light safe
within your downy nest

knew a time of acid rain; my
kindred's seals weak, I peck
the exoderms, feed.

Thrive on salt-wet scarlet
drops, my crest swells goldly
moulten with the morning light.

Reach maturation, know the
drums of vinaceous heart,
by steps I reach the butte

rise, unfurl candescent wings
wrap all that is of bone
and sinew in my path,

screams silenced by
my talons, rise to
join you, Mother —

claim the source of being
dark to dark, in splendid
flame, consume.

— Marge Simon

VOICES IN A SHELTER HOME

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman
art: Janet Aulisio

The author informs us that she is currently teaching old-time fiddling through community education and that she plays dance music at granges almost every week.

She has recently sold stories to Aboriginal SF, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, *and* The Year's Best Horror *anthology (edited by Karl Edward Wagner).*

"Women are merely splendid interruptions of light," Ryder said, setting his wine glass on the white linen tablecloth and smiling at me, the candlelight casting small reflections on the surfaces of his dark eyes. "Almost everything is." He looked rather splendid himself, with his dark hair pulled back into a ponytail to celebrate our going to the best restaurant in town, and his stubble shaved off. He was even wearing a clean white cableknit sweater.

I was wearing a dress, which was also atypical behavior. Most of the time I spent with Ryder, I wore nothing at all. I cut a tiny piece off my filet mignon and lifted it to my mouth. Meat that melted in your mouth. I had trouble believing the reality of it. It was like cats with lizard skins, a contradictory image.

"You're one of my favorite light interruptions, Ariel," Ryder said, leaning back to survey me in a proprietary way.

If you are what you eat, perhaps Ryder owned a piece of me, because he'd paid for a number of my meals lately, the best being this one to celebrate his opening at the Surfview Gallery. Three of his paintings had sold at the opening, and they were not cheap. I shaved off another piece of the filet and savored the bloody brown woodsmoke taste of it. I didn't know if I'd ever taste anything this fine again. So let Ryder look at me like that. If I had an owner who'd feed me like this all the time, I wouldn't complain —

Of course you would, said the image of my counselor in my head, shaking her finger at me. You had better complain. What have we been working on all these months, Ariel, if not this very concept? No one can own you but yourself.

Ariel, you're mine, Griffith said in my head. Mine! Nobody else's!

Griffith never would be quiet when I wanted him to.

Come back here where you belong, he said. Come home.

Don't listen, said my counselor.

"And now, the good news," said Ryder, breaking up the argument in my head. "I found a house."



"You did?" I lifted my glass. "To the new house!"

He raised his glass too; we clinked. "It's up on the ridge, no trees or other houses between it and the sun. The best light, the best view of the ocean, a big porch to paint on in fair weather, and a second-story room with a skylight for foul."

"It sounds terrific," I said.

"It's big. There's a detached garage that's set up as a playroom that I might turn into an extra studio, and there are two other bedrooms besides the one upstairs. Would you like to move in with me?"

I thought about the first painting that had sold at the gallery opening. It was about an acre across and showed my torso, paled to marble, with seafoam, the bubbles large and iridescent, clumped around it. My torso. No arms, legs, or head. I don't care what anybody says. I think the Venus de Milo used to have arms.

"Sure," I said.

"I've been here before," I said the next morning, glancing up at the salt-etched face of the gray house. Small dark windows frosted with the breath of a constant sea breeze peered back at me.

"You used to know somebody who lived here?" Ryder, struggling with the key in the front door lock, glanced back at me.

"A few somebodies."

He got the door open.

I looked past him toward the living room, with the shag green carpet I had spent so much time staring at, and dread simmered in the pit of my stomach. "How'd you get this place?"

"I drove by and there was a sign. I called the realtor. No trouble at all." He forged ahead into the house, dropping armloads of easel and paint box on the floor. "Look at this view!" he said, walking to the double glass doors. I knew the view by heart already. Below spread the seaside town of Guthrie, nestled along the coast highway, and beyond, the sea disappeared into the sky.

How much I had hated that view the first time I saw it. "It's so open," I told the social worker. "If I can see all that, maybe he can look up and see me." She had told me I'd be safe here, but she didn't know Griffith.

"Isn't it great?" Ryder said, and I walked up and joined him as he gloated out the window. The sea wore a cloak of sparkles, as if the sun had shed its leaves for the winter. A faint haze turned everything blue-gray.

"I have a headache," I said.

Ryder glanced at me, but nothing could dim his enthusiasm for long. "Come on," he said, "I'll show you the upstairs. I'm going to use that as the main studio, though I might set up the really big canvases down here, because otherwise it'll be a bitch to get them out of the house. These glass doors will help a lot."

"I've been upstairs before," I said.

"When it was empty, though? You gotta see the space."

"All right," I said, and followed him up the stairs into the lookout room. I remembered one woman, Marcie, roosting up there all the time. The room had windows that looked out on three sides. She was always watching for her Don, afraid he would find her. "He'll beat up Father Richard, he'll find out the address, he's not afraid of anything," she said, and sat on one of the bunk beds we had up there and watched and watched.

Griffith hadn't beaten up anybody to find me. He talked to my dentist, the one I got to fix the frequent chips in my teeth. They were both members of the Guthrie Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. Griffith got a phone number from the dentist, and one of his friends at the telephone company, who lost a bunch of money in a poker game one night, gave him the address that belonged to the phone number instead of paying off the debt, and soon enough, Griffith was knocking on the shelter door. I doped the sequence out one night when the telephone person was visiting the Brew-pub and feeling chatty. Griffith's smile didn't work on some of the shelter women, though. Some of us learned. While Griffith was talking to Florence, Anna Jo came down to the garage-playroom, where I was watching the children, and told me to hide. Griffith left without finding me; I got a transfer to an inland shelter in a town where Griffith had no friends.

When I heard Griffith had left Guthrie, I moved home. The salt called to me, and the gray days, and the hush of the waves tumbling sand over itself. No inland days are ever like a day on the coast. I got a job at the new Brew-pub, with people I hadn't known before, and I found a little one-bedroom place in the north section of town, far from the house Griffith bought when we first got married, and not so far from the house Ryder was showing me around now.

"Isn't this great?" said Ryder, his arms wide, embracing the upstairs room with its windows and skylight giving out onto the gray haze.

I went to the window facing inland, toward the road and the lake down the ridge. Pines crowded each other below, knitting a tapestry of green needles to carpet the edge of the sky. Occasional maples, red and gold with fall, floated like captured sunset clouds among the pines, and small awkward angles of roof and fingers of chimney poked through here and there.

"You'll love it here," said Ryder from just behind me.

I sighed and turned to him. He hugged me. When I glanced at him, his eyes were studying the room, and his mouth was smiling. I felt again like that armless, legless torso in the painting. A splendid interruption of the light, with a hollow interior. Well, being appreciated solely for one's outer layer was better than being rebuked for existing. In my mind, I sorted through my possessions, figuring out which to pack and which to dispose of, and I rehearsed my resignation at the Brew-pub.

* * *

"It's cold," I said. I was lying on yards of pink velvet draped over a couch. Ryder glanced at me, then looked back at his work. I listened to the sound of his brush stroking the textured cloth. The room was full of the acrid pine scent of turpentine. My head ached. I squinted in Ryder's direction and saw him stroke, the edge of his wide brush loaded with seashell-pink paint, and pause, and frown. I couldn't see the mammoth canvas, not the way it was angled. I wondered which parts of me he was going to leave out this time. He set the brush down on his palette and wandered into his office/bedroom. Presently he emerged with a small space heater. He plugged it into a living room wall socket and switched it on. It blew heat against my lower legs.

"No," said Ryder after a minute, "it's casting orange tones on you." He moved the heater farther away and went back to work.

I sighed. "You want orange tones or goose bumps?" I muttered. I had one leg doubled beneath me, and I could feel it numbing with loss of circulation. Soon I'd have to ask for a break.

"What was that?" said Ryder, his tone startled.

"Nothing."

"I don't mean you. I mean that sobbing."

"What?" I listened. A car drove past outside. Wind shwinged in the telephone wires. Far off, the waves whispered to the sand. Nearer, Ryder's breathing was deeper than it had been.

"There's someone in the house," said Ryder. He put his brush and palette down on top of squished and spent paint tubes sitting on a nearby TV table. He cocked his head. He stretched until his shoulders cracked, and looked at me. "Did you invite somebody in?"

"No," I said. I felt something funny and looked down. My hand was trembling against my thigh. Griffith used to ask me that question. Anytime the answer was yes, he hit me. He hated for anyone else to come into our house.

Don't be talking to those bitch friends of yours, his voice whispered now. Don't be getting stupid ideas from them. You don't need anybody but me.

"Take a break," said Ryder. "I've got to find her." He looked around, then headed for the staircase.

Slowly I sat up. The pink velvet, chill where it hadn't touched me, nuzzled my palms. My legs prickled.

Ryder clattered down the stairs. "Nobody up there," he said. "Where's it coming from?" He looked at me. I was massaging my leg. He went into the office and came back out, shaking his head. He went into my bedroom, the small dark room near the front of the house where the night manager used to live. It was the only room that locked. She was the only resident immune to the petty thievery that was one of the constants of shelter life, much worse at the inland shelter I ended up in later. Her room had appealed to me because she was the safest person living in the shelter when I was here before.

Now Ryder was walking in without knocking or asking. I gripped my ankle and told myself, it's okay, it's normal, he doesn't have to knock, he

knows I'm out here, he's paying the rent, why shouldn't he walk into any room he wants?

The counselor in my head disagreed. Set limits, Ariel; set boundaries. You need them.

Slowly I unlocked my fingers from around my ankle. I shook my arm, trying to ease the tension. It didn't work.

"She's not in there, either," said Ryder, coming out of my room. "Would you for chrissake help me look?"

"Look for what?"

He came and grabbed my wrist, pulling me to my feet. "That sobbing, that crying, can't you hear it? Where's she hiding?" Then his grip loosened. The listening look in his eyes intensified. "No, now she's stopped." He looked around, a frown scoring parallel dents above the bridge of his nose. "It's gone. How'd she get out of the house with us sitting here right between the front door and the back?"

"I don't know." Better not to contradict. Better not to admit I didn't know what he was talking about. I slipped out of his grasp, sat on the couch, and pulled my knees up on the velvet with me so the green shag rug wouldn't be touching my feet any more. I drooped my head forward, my dark hair flipping down in front of my eyes, hugged my legs, and waited.

"Ariel?" said Ryder. He touched my shoulder. His hand was cold. "Hold that pose, all right?" I heard his footsteps cross the floor to his canvas. I made several small shifts in position so I would be comfortable for a while, and I waited, listening to the small rasp of brush on cloth.

He crept in beside me that night, his feet cold against my legs, his hands cold against my back. I edged over to give him more room, and he followed, his breath on my neck the only warm thing about him. "She's crying again," he whispered, "and I can't find her."

"Shh," I said, "it's nothing," and I turned toward him, putting my arms around him and remembering my mother whispering the same words to me in the darkness on nights after I had lain tightly curled in bed, my hands over my ears, trying not to hear what was happening downstairs. "It's nothing," I said again, just like my mother, who could fool me in the darkness, though daylight would reveal that my mother's "nothing" wore cuts and bruises.

Ryder snuggled against me, his stubble rough on the skin of my breast, the chill easing out of him, and eventually his breathing slowed into sleep.

The next morning he would not look at me until I was curled up on the couch the way I had been the day before, and then I couldn't look back. I knew he was looking because I heard him painting. Eventually he threw down his brush. "Now there's two of them!" he yelled. "Damn it!" He stomped up the stairs. I released myself and stretched, thinking about

Loopy Leslie, who went into screaming fits sometimes and ran around and around the house, pulling the hair of anybody who got in her way, her cries long and wordless. She usually ended by ripping off her shirt in the living room, throwing it down, and scratching at her breasts and belly. Her arms bore long ladders of scars, starting at the wrists and staggering their way up toward the elbows. Darlene had sneered at her. "Trial runs," she said. "Why don't you ever get it right, and give the rest of us a break?"

Leslie would just stare. Words meant almost nothing to her.

She had terrified me when I first got to the shelter. By the time I transferred, I considered her a normal part of life.

Ryder came down the stairs, panting, and said, "Where are they? What do they want? Why don't they stop?" He ran into the kitchen, then made a sweep of his room and mine and the bathroom. "It's a tape recorder, isn't it?" he yelled at last, taking my shoulders and shaking me. "You're doing this to me. Why? I never hurt you!"

"I'm not doing anything," I said, the ready tears starting. "There's nothing there. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Two women wailing. Why are you playing this trick on me?"

"I'm not," I said, putting my arms up in front of my face in the protective stance I had learned while I lived with Griffith.

Ryder dropped me and I fell back on the couch. "You're lying," he said.

You're lying, Griffith's voice echoed. Bitch. Where do you get off lying to me?

"I don't hear anything," I whispered.

Ryder stormed into his room and came out with a portable tape recorder. He plugged it in, set it on the floor, knelt beside it, and pressed the record button. "They're louder than a rock concert," he said. He waited while the cassette squeaked and whirled, and I listened to nothing. He pressed stop and rewind and play, and out of the little speaker came his voice, saying again, "They're louder than a rock concert," and then nothing but his breathing.

He looked at me, then at the ceiling of the living room. His mouth was half-open. He rose. I saw the storm signs in his eyes, signs I had seen in Griffith. Sometimes, if I talked fast, or ran up and hugged him, or gave him a drink, I could chase the storm away before it broke. I had never seen Ryder look like that before, and I didn't know what to do for him. My body had its own ideas. It curled up, hiding my face and front, my hands clamping down on my ears.

I waited, huddled and tense, for the first blow to land, but all that happened was that time passed, and I got tired and cold, my arms shaking and aching from being locked in the same position. Get out of the situation, the counselor whispered in my head, get away anyway you can. Take care of yourself, Ariel.

Slowly I relaxed. I lifted my hands away from my ears and heard the brush

moving against the canvas. "Hold it," said Ryder. His voice sounded normal.

"I can't," I said. My voice trembled. If he took a step toward me, I knew I would curl up in a ball again.

He sighed. "Well, okay, take a break," he said.

I opened my eyes. The tape recorder was gone, as if none of it had ever happened. How well I knew that feeling, the feeling of Let's Change History. I let my legs down, stretched my arms, rolled my head to get a kink out of my neck. Ryder walked into the kitchen. I heard the sound of water running into the teakettle, a throaty gurgle. I felt tired. He could pretend nothing had happened, but my body knew we'd been through some sort of storm, and what I wanted to do was crawl away and rest. He came back in and said, "I'm heating water. Ready to pose until it's hot? You can have coffee then."

"Sure," I said.

The next morning I got up and went to look at the painting. I usually didn't look at them until they were done, because they were always a surprise. Ryder saw things I never looked at, and left out things I always looked for. I liked the suspense of not knowing until the end. But when I woke in the darkness of my little room, I heard the voice of my counselor, whispering for me to leave, and I thought, the painting will tell me.

There were three me's in it, one lying open on the couch, one half-curled, her face hidden by hair, and one curled tight, hands clutched to ears. Every one of my body parts was there, though the hands and feet trailed away in the stretched me. The pink velvet was washed with red. The me's made a story across the canvas, either a woman curling up or a woman uncurling, depending on if you read it right to left or left to right. Around the edges of each me and my velvet nests were lines, red and yellow, gridwork that faded to black.

In a way, the picture reminded me of those little capsules you get in novelty stores, instant farmyard, instant zoo, just add water to the egg woman and she opens out into a full-sized model. The other thing that struck me was that the edges were so rough. Ryder had lost the clean line, the elegant focus, that made his work so pleasant to look at and have around the house. I thought, this painting won't sell. It's too ugly. It's too real.

He came up behind me as I studied the work. He glanced at my face. I looked at him, asking without words. I saw his face pinch. His hands started toward his ears (my eyes shifted to the curled image of me, hands clamped down on ears), then dropped. I knew he was hearing those voices again, Loopy Leslie, maybe, or Marcie the watcher, or any of us. Sometimes somebody started crying and it set us all off, yowling, everyone offering her sorrows, nobody accepting anybody else's because her own were too much to carry.

Ryder stared at me. I shrugged. He looked at the painting. "Could you do that one again?" he yelled over nonexistent noise, pointing to the tightly curled one. I nodded, went to the couch, and shucked out of my robe. I curled into my protected position, hands over ears, eyes clenched shut, knees to nose and elbows clamped at the sides of my legs. In the silence between my ears, I heard the bones in my hand creaking as my muscles shifted, and the slow drum of my pulse. When I was like this, all the doors closed, denying the existence of anything outside, how had Griffith gotten in, gotten to me? Why was he still here, whispering things to me even now, his endless whisper stronger than my counselor's words? I'll get you yet. I'll make you wish you'd never been born, you worthless bitch. How dare you think —

I felt a touch on my shoulder, cold fingers. I tightened up. The fingers pried at my hand, pulled it away from my ear, and Griffith's voice faded. Were my own hands holding his voice inside my head? "Ariel? Time for break," said Ryder.

It took me a while to loosen up and climb back into my robe. Ryder and I sat across from each other at the kitchen table, sipping black coffee, staring into each other's eyes. At last he said, "Say you hear them too. Please. I saw it in your face."

"I hear something else."

"They're ruining the picture. You could tell, couldn't you?"

"It's different."

"They keep crying, and they're not even somewhere I can see them."

Not even interrupting the light for you, I thought. Poor Ryder, here in a house full of splendid light and invisible women.

"Ariel, who are they?" Ryder asked.

"Who?"

"You said you knew some people who used to live here. Who are these voices?"

"One of them might be mine," I said. Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! The voice that yelled at me this time was my own.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"How could you be haunting this house? You're still alive."

"Parts of me are, anyway," I said, loudly, so that I could be heard above the chorus of yelled Shut up!s.

Ryder gulped coffee and stared at my face. "What happened in this house?"

Don't say it, I told myself. The only reason he keeps you around is that you're flawless to his eyes. Let any of the real you through, and you'll be out on your ass. He likes clean lines, smooth edges, elegance. He doesn't like anything below the surface.

Ryder reached out and gripped my hand. "Tell me," he said.

Just say no, my counselor said. Set limits. Take care of yourself.

Don't you be keeping any secrets from me, bitch, said Griffith.

"Please," said Ryder, his fingers closed tight around my hand.

"This was a shelter home for battered women," I said.

He let go of my hand. He leaned across the table and brushed the hair away from my forehead. "Oh," he said. "I always wondered about that." He touched the scar I had to remind me of the time Griffith had hit me with an ashtray. "And there's some marks on your back."

"You don't put them in your paintings. I didn't think you noticed."

"I didn't want to." He covered his eyes with his hands, leaning on his elbows on the table.

I got up and put my coffee mug in the sink. Schooled as I was in reading actions before the words got worse, I could tell a rejection when I saw one. "I'll go pack," I said. And go where? Maybe the other barmaid from the Brew-pub would let me borrow her couch until I got back on my feet and could afford first and last at some little apartment.

"You can't leave. I haven't finished the picture yet," Ryder said, and when I turned, he was looking at me. I couldn't read his expression or his voice. I felt scared. "I think I can fix it," he said. He stood up and came toward me. I backed into the living room.

"Don't be scared," he said, following me. I took my place on the couch and curled up tight, cupping my ears. How could Ryder tell me not to be scared? There was no place to put my foot and trust the ground would hold steady. The voices in my head had gone dead: no one knew what to say, how to advise me now, not even Griffith.

I wondered if Ryder was going to put something in or take something out to fix the picture. Would he paint the women's voices in somehow, or had he done that already? Was he hearing them now? I would never be able to tell while I was curled up tight.

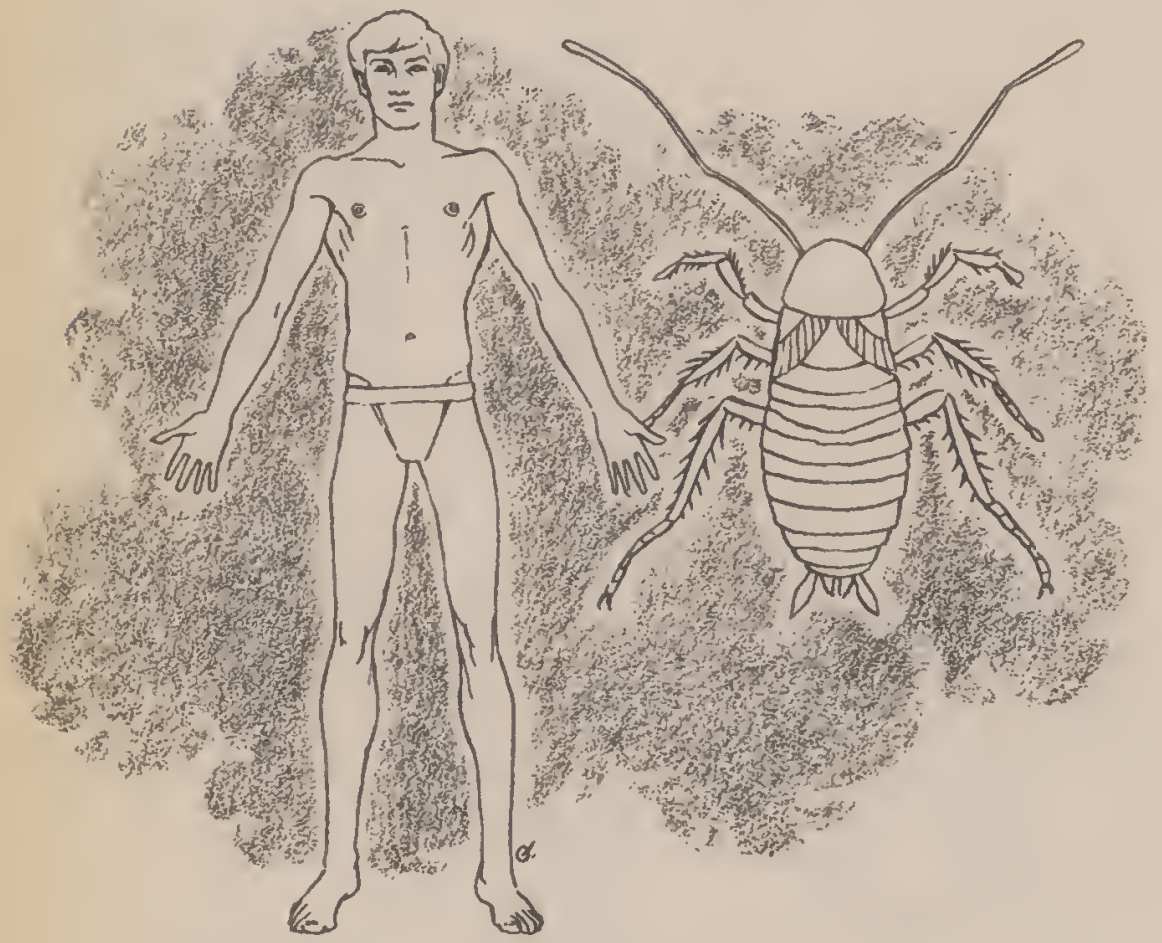
I dropped out of pose and looked at Ryder. His brush was loaded with red, and he was staring through me. "Hey," I said. "I'm here."

He blinked and focused on me. "It's so damned ugly," he said. "Nobody's going to buy it."

"Maybe people will look at it, though," I said, lifting a hand to my face. My fingertips came away wet with warmth. I stared at the trace of tears, then looked at the red tip of Ryder's brush. "Maybe it will speak to them." ✿

A CENOTAPH WITH LOTS OF STYLE

by Kelly Wand
art: George Barr



The author informs us that "this is my first professional sale. The finished product is obviously sort of Fred Browny, but I wasn't thinking of him when the idea for it materialized. Although writing it wasn't much trouble and I enjoy reading *pieces of the same mock-cosmic ilk, it's not the kind of thing I write much of." Currently, he is working on an SF action-suspense novel entitled* The Last Day.

The last cockroach on earth crawled alone in a room. There was a knocker on the door.

The roach, as bugs went, was very old. So when the door swung creakily open, perhaps the roach's great age kept it from scrambling quickly out of view. Or maybe it was simply too old to care. In any case, the man, who was also old, shut the door softly and took off his coat without seeing the roach on the wall beside the lintel. Then, kicking off his shoes, the man plonked himself on the couch and snapped the television on.

It had been a long, bad day for the man. He was a politician and that wasn't such a nice thing to be anymore. Day-to-day responsibilities were punishing enough on a sixty-two-year-old physique, but what with confirmations and hearings and debriefings and summits and reelection planning — why, the man was pretty sure he worked harder than any doctors or mailmen or roof-shinglers he know of. In addition to all *this*, the past two weeks had been a new degree of nerve-racking because of terrorism and the meltdown and the distressing update about the ozone layer. Politics, the man admitted as he flipped from the news to some game show because the hostess was eye-candy, was no longer a matter of governorship but merely of passing the buck. That way, everyone could claim to have had a hand in a wise decision and only one scapegoat would be required for every stupid one.

At one time he might have reflected on these myriad ironies, but the time allotted for apathy diminished with the years and his present nonactivity was as precious to him as any amount in embezzled campaign funds.

Through the window of his deliberately spartan living room, the sun set in a glorious collage of lavender and orange. Reaching up, he shut his drapes the rest of the way on this spectacle. His day had been filled with mushroom clouds; he needed no dazzling reminder.

The telephone rang, but the man didn't answer it. Certain people always called him at certain times to ask him certain things. Though he didn't care to comply with routine right now, he was curious about the caller. As his head swiveled to check the face of the wall-clock, his gaze lit on the roach, a stark sable dot against the unsullied white of his plastered wall.

The first feeling that rippled through him was sheer astonishment. How long had it been since the global fumigation — two years or three? Of all the world's ills, the limitless armies of cockroaches had presumably been eradicated, and presumably to man's benefit. Because the human race had proven apparently unable to resolve the complexities of racial genocide, germ warfare, nuclear buildup, ecological doom, and abortion, a powerful pesticide had been developed to cure a planetwide malady from which everyone suffered and about which, in the desperate search for a single scapegoat to the aggregate plights, everyone managed to care. Harmless to mammals, amphibians, and even other insects, toxins were released into the air that would, given sufficient time to diffuse, kill Terra's penultimate pests, leave the world a tidier place, and allow apprehensive millions to eat a

burrito without unfolding and inspecting first.

The man, his narrowing eyes fastened on the motionless roach, recalled with pride that he had been a driving force behind the antipestilence operation. He had permitted billions of dollars and thousands of entomologists to be concentrated on this terrifying dilemma. He stressed the program's urgency to his colleagues, he made public-service announcements on television to rally support, and he went to Dallas to accept a key to the city for his sanitization efforts.

And now this final effrontery. He was unable to define the angst that filled him as he rose softly and padded across the carpet without making any sudden movements. He was unsure even how he knew that this *was* the last cockroach, doomed to die without reproducing (however they did it, he'd never really investigated, for he was a man of panache and integrity), a survivor due to some freak immunization factor or mere providence.

The last roach: an amalgam of all the man's frustrations and failures, an interloper of his off-hours, a trespasser on government property.

The man's shoe came down on the wall with a squelch.

And everything dissolved in a rainbow maelstrom.

The universe was folded up and returned to its box.

The **two beings**, both victor and loser, felt a bit gloomy now that the round was over. Both of them had enjoyed this bout, extraordinarily so.

"So quickly," intoned the **cockroach**. "A pity." His words reverberated around them, bouncing off the walls of the endless void.

The **man** thought he detected a touch of scorn in the other's voice. Generously acceding the benefit of the doubt, he held the box lid open. "Shall we play again, then? Double or nothing."

The **cockroach** assented. Obligingly, the **man** began tinkering with the starstuff, his actions swift now through familiarity.

"We'll try it your way this time," the **man** said, flinging the atoms out once more. "A new variation. Mine small, yours large." It had, after all, been his opponent's initial suggestion.

Quoth the **cockroach** thoughtfully, as if pondering the true answer to an age-old question: "I suppose Size *does* matter."

And they played. . . . ✪



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SEMI-SEMI-STABLE

SCIENCE

by Stephen L. Gillett

Dr. Stephen L. Gillett is a research associate at the University of Nevada's Mackay School of Mines. His popular science articles that have appeared in Amazing® Stories *include "The Scientific Literature" (March 1985), "The Cambrian Explosion" (May 1985), "Weird LAWKI" (May 1987), and "Stress, Survival, and Selfish Genes" (January 1991).*

A huge star, 10 or 15 or 50 times as massive as our Sun, runs out of nuclear fuel after a wastrel, spendthrift life of only a few tens of millions of years. It then collapses on itself, triggering a gigantic explosion. . . .

As all SF readers know, that is a supernova.

And, as all SF readers also know, supernovae are element factories, spraying newly forged atoms into the void, where they can later condense into planets, some of which may spawn life. As Joni Mitchell once sang, we're "billion-year-old carbon." (Her numbers were a bit off, but that's poetic license.)

But you know, it's funny how people can wax so lyrical about high-level nuclear waste. Because, for all the fine poetry, that's what it is. A handful of raw supernova-ash, right from the oven, so to speak, would quickly be lethal. You might as well grab a used fuel rod from a nuclear reactor. In either case, you'd better have your will up-to-date.

The supernova explosion doesn't just make stable nuclei, it makes all the nuclei it can, indiscriminately. Most are radioactive, and some are very radioactive indeed. Those newly forged elements have to sit around for a long while before they're safe, so that the highly unstable atoms can decay into stable forms.

But we can't get too chauvinistic here; we're talking about building planets, and that doesn't happen on a human time scale. The *really* hot stuff decays away quickly on those scales. All the stuff we're used to worrying about from nuclear reactors, things like strontium-90, cesium-137, iodine-131 — or the cobalt-60 popular in doomsday war scenarios — have half-lives measured in mere decades. They're gone in an eye blink.

(A quick review of terminology: an *isotope* is an atomic nucleus containing a specific number of protons and neutrons. The number of protons is characteristic of the chemical element; the number of neutrons doesn't matter, chemically. The total of protons and neutrons is the isotope number. *Nuclide* just means a given type of atom. For the purposes here, they're about synonymous.)

Even an isotope like plutonium-239, with its 25,000-year half-life, is gone quickly. (Plutonium-239, of course, is the highly toxic metal used in some nuclear bombs and is a component of high-level radwaste from nuclear reactors.) Geological (and astronomical) processes are so leisurely that even 25,000 years is inconsequential.

We can call these the "ephemeral" isotopes, anything with a half-life less

than a hundred thousand years or so.

Remember, half-life is the time it takes for half of a given quantity of a radioactive substance to decay. If you have a kilo of ^{239}Pu and wait 25,000 years, you will then have half a kilo left. If you wait another 25,000 years, half of *that* will be left, and so on. After ten half-lives, only 1/1024th of the original radioactive substance is left. (1024 is 2^{10}; that is, 2 x 2 x 2. . . , 10 times.) Half-life is a property of anything showing exponential decay, where the amount remaining at any instant is proportional to the elapsed time.

Phrased like that, it sounds like a radioisotope *never* decays away completely. Not so: by the time you get down to a few hundred atoms or so, the decay gets much more haphazard. Any individual atom has a certain probability of decaying in a certain period of time, and of course it doesn't know what the other atoms are doing. Only when you're dealing with large numbers of atoms do things average out to a nice regular half-life. If you wait long enough, though, all the atoms *will* decay completely. Eventually.

Not all unstable isotopes is ephemeral. It's been about four and a half billion years since the supernova that formed our elements, and all the unstable atoms have still not decayed. Not by a long shot. In one of his essays, Isaac Asimov called these the "semi-stable elements," natural radionuclides *so* long-lived they persist even over geologic time.

The semi-stable nuclides fall into two classes. The first and least interesting class comprises those nuclei that are *really* long-lived, so long-lived they might as well be stable — even on a geologic time scale. Only when the universe is billions of times older than it is now will enough of such nuclides have decayed to even notice. One example is the single isotope of ordinary bismuth, ^{209}Bi. It has a half-life of over 2×10^{18} years, two billion billion years. Out of every two billion atoms of bismuth incorporated into the Earth at its formation, only three have decayed since. 1,999,999,997 are still with us. Another example is tellurium-128, with a half-life of over 10^{24} years, almost a million times longer than bismuth.

We might call these the "stable-for-all-intents-and-purposes" nuclides. (In fact, based on simple energy calculations, lots of the "stable" nuclides are radioactive, but with exceedingly long half-lives.)

Another set of semi-stable isotopes is both more interesting and more important. These are the ones with half-lives on the order of the age of the Earth, say from about 500 million years to 15 billion years. We could call these the Earth-lived isotopes. The really important ones (to us, anyway) are the two natural isotopes of uranium, ^{235}U (h.l. 704 million years) and ^{238}U (h.l. 4.47 billion years), and the single natural isotope of thorium, ^{232}Th (h.l. 14 billion years). And, last but not least, the radioactive isotope of potassium, ^{40}K, with a half-life of 1.3 billion years. (Most natural potassium consists of the two stable isotopes ^{39}K and ^{41}K; one atom in 10,000, however, is ^{40}K.)

Why are these isotopes "really" important? Radioactive decay, of course, releases energy, and inside the Earth that energy shows up as heat. *That's* what's important. The heat keeps our planet stirred up, to run volcanoes and to drive tectonics, the processes that raise mountains and move continents. For a living planet like the Earth, active tectonics is important to keep nutrients from all

ending up buried and useless in the ocean depths.

Earth-lived isotopes are also useful for age-dating of rocks. When a mineral crystallizes, it incorporates specific elements according to their chemical properties. The mineral, of course, doesn't care whether the atoms are radioactive or not. So, after becoming part of this crystal, the atoms continue to decay, and the element they decay into often is wholly alien to that crystal, because its chemical properties are so different. So, to get an age date, you simply count up the number of "daughter" atoms from the decay. And then, from the half-life, you can calculate how long it took to get that many daughter atoms.

Several other Earth-lived isotopes, which are inconsequential as heat sources, are nonetheless extremely useful for such age-dating. The most important are rubidium-87, (h.l. 49 billion years), which decays into stable strontium-87, and samarium-147 (h.l. 110 billion years), which decays into neodymium-143. I know, these *aren't* household words, but they're very useful to geologists, because the more different kinds of Earth-lived elements you have, the more different kinds of rocks you can date. Different minerals have different chemical properties, and to date a mineral with radioactive decay, you need a radioactive element whose chemical properties are such that it gets included in that mineral to begin with.

You can even use the different chemical properties of different Earth-lived elements to track large-scale geologic processes. For example, the light-colored lunar crust is made up mostly of plagioclase feldspar, a mineral rich in calcium. Since the chemical properties of strontium are similar to calcium, there's a lot of strontium in the lunar crust. But when you analyze the strontium, it turns out to contain very little strontium-87 from rubidium-87 decay. This means that the plagioclase originally crystallized very early in the history of the Solar System, when the rubidium-87 was still rubidium. And that, in turn, tells us that the lunar crust is very ancient. (By the way, these isotopes have nothing to do with strontium-90, an ephemeral isotope (h.l. only 29 years) found in radwaste and fallout.)

On the Earth, a much more complicated world, geoscientists are tracing the history of our planet's crust and mantle (the thick rocky zone below the crust) by looking at the different isotopic compositions of both strontium and neodymium.

Betwixt and between the Earth-lived isotopes and the ephemeral isotopes are another very interesting group. They're not stable, nor even really long-lived, like uranium or thorium. But yet again, they're not short-lived either, not even on the scale of geologic time. These isotopes have half-lives in the millions of years to tens of millions of years range, up to 100 m.y. (million years) or so. (Note that even a half-life of 100 m.y. is still only 1/45 of Earth's age.) To extend Dr. Asimov's terminology, we can term these the "semi-semi-stable isotopes." They're long-lived enough to have had some important effects in the early Solar System, and they've left traces in the geologic record. But they did not last long enough to survive till the present.

(I should mention that a smidgen of these isotopes is being made all the time by cosmic rays interacting with atoms on Earth, in the same way that the more famous carbon-14, an ephemeral isotope (h.l. 5700 years) is made. Carbon-14 decay, of course, is used by archaeologists and paleontologists for

age-dating organic materials like wood, leather, and so on. Similarly, several such "cosmogenic" semi-semi-stable isotopes also show promise for age-dating.)

Why are these guys important, and what sort of spoor did they leave? Well, some are important scientifically because they tell us roughly how long it took for that raw supernova-ash to get gathered into planets, back at the origin of the Solar System, and something about the gathering process.

For example, excess xenon-129, which has been found in many meteorites, is the daughter product of iodine-129, with a half-life of about 17 m.y. Xenon is a member of the noble, or "inert," gases (it is used to fill xenon flashtubes for strobe lights). Under normal conditions, it does not form chemical compounds. Iodine, however, is chemically reactive and *will* get incorporated into meteorites. Once it's there, even when it decays into xenon, the xenon remains trapped in the rock. Hence, meteorites coalesced within a few iodine-129 half-lives of the formation of the elements in the Solar System, because some iodine-129 was still around.

Another example is palladium-107, which decays into silver-107 with a half-life of 6.5 m.y. Excess silver-107, from the decay of extinct palladium-107, has now been found in quite a number of iron meteorites.

Yet, another interesting isotope is plutonium-244, ^{244}Pu, with a half-life of 82 million years. (Note that this is a *different* isotope from the ^{239}Pu used in bombs.) ^{24}Pu has also left traces. A common way for this nuclide to decay is "spontaneous fission," in which the atom splits all by itself. Some of the fission products are xenon isotopes, and such xenon has been found in meteorites, just as with the xenon-129 from extinct iodine-129.

In fact, ^{24}Pu has left more than traces. The Earth is about 50 ^{24}Pu half-lives old. That means about $1/2^{50}$ of the original ^{244}Pu should still be left, or one atom in every quintillion. This is an *awfully* small amount, of course, but it has been detected. In the late 1960s, scientists found a smidgen of surviving ^{244}Pu.

So, about 100 million years is a good cutoff between the semi-semi-stable isotopes and the Earth-lived isotopes. A shorter half-life than that, and the nuclide has decayed away completely; longer than that, and at least a little bit is still sticking around.

Now, there's a couple other isotopes, besides ^{244}Pu, with half-lives on the order of a hundred million years. They are niobium-92, with a half-life of 160 million years, and samarium-146, with a half-life of 103 million years.

Again, these are not household words, I realize! Niobium (also called columbium) is a very hard, high melting point metal used for alloying steel. All known natural niobium consists of the single stable isotope, niobium-93. Samarium we mentioned before, in connection with the isotope samarium-147 used in geochemical age-dating.

Anyway, assuming the half-lives are right, these nuclides should not have — quite — decayed away completely. In a gram of niobium metal, consisting of about 6.5×10^{21} (6.5 thousand billion billion) atoms, there should still be over 10 billion atoms of niobium-92. Similarly, a gram of samarium should contain over 100 million atoms of samarium-146. So far as I know, however, no one has found any surviving nuclei. (Geochemists think they may have found traces from the decay of samarium-146, but not any actual surviving atoms. No one has even looked for niobium-92, however.)

I should point out, though, in fairness to the isotope geochemists, that it's an *extremely* difficult procedure to separate out a few atoms of one isotope when they're dispersed through vastly larger amounts of another isotope — especially when they may not even exist. Finding a needle in a haystack is trivial by comparison. It's not surprising no one has tried. But if the half-lives are correct, a few atoms should still exist. (And you saw it here first!)

A last isotope, 1.1-million-year aluminum-26, is especially interesting. ^{26}Al decays into magnesium-26, and slight excesses of ^{26}Mg have been recently found in aluminum minerals in some meteorites. Finding the remains of ^{26}Al again tells us about something how fast the planets accreted after the elements were formed.

Even more important, though, is that ^{26}Al releases a *lot* of energy when it decays. I just talked about how uranium, thorium, and potassium-40 keep the Earth tectonically and volcanically active from the heat they release. This works fine on a planet the size of the Earth, but a small body like an asteroid cools off much too efficiently to get stirred up by the heat produced by these elements. With a smidgen of ^{26}Al, however, even asteroid-sized bodies would have melted, back when the Solar System was formed. This probably accounts for iron meteorites: when a body consisting of haphazard mixture of planet-stuff melts, it chemically differentiates. That is, the rock floats to the outside, and the metal sinks to the inside to form a core. Later, as asteroids collide with each other over time, these differentiated bodies get broken up, to yield pieces both rich in iron metal and in rock. Take note, all you would-be asteroid miners!

Age-dating of rocks and planets, tectonic activity, the very formation of the Solar System, and now even space resources. The semi-semi-stable isotopes were not just important in Solar System history, they're important to human beings today.



THE HERMETIC PRINCE

The Mediterranean caverns
inside Mercury, A.D. 3405

It grieves me
To consent to this killing, Alfonso
Your rival's skull
Can be mounted on an axis
& spun beneath my hand — a globe
painted with the map of Heaven

Or he can be made to dance
Like a puppet
paper-thin
In a space between the five Platonic solids

Listen — the roof of the world
Arching, unclimbable
a mile overhead
gives back the voice of the sea

A myriad braziers
Hung along the rock-spine
Swing & sway in a booming wind
look
How the shadows swirl
around our feet, Alfonso

I decree the laws of perspective
too shall oscillate
The grid of New Science
Shall be twisted by the pull of dissonant desire

— that the soul
Become an assassin of harmonies
& move like a metaphysical cat, slinking
along the keys of a clavichord

I have studied every crack & outcropping
On that far-off ceiling
with a miraculous glass tube

Yet theologians warn us never to think
    of the insane light
Beyond the adamantine shield

This little shell of a world
    with its intricate
Hatreds, its masked love affairs
Is enough

. . . come closer
I wish to admire your sleeve
    sewn with transistors
    & other trinkets
Robbed from the derelict Earthship
— the shrine of unbelievers

But you flinch from my embrace
Is it true, then? — the report of unrest
The 'ponic gardens a wintry boneyard
— the miners starving
In their warrens

Near the upper levels, finally, I hear
The air locks grind open

The last days arrive all at once, a howling mob
That pounds against the gilded portal
    of the zodiac
What is time itself but God's unslaked passion
The cyclone of the demiurge

— depart, Alfonso
I'll grant your request, here at the zero point
Of circular causality
    leave me alone to contemplate
The lustrous decay of metals

Only take this roll of parchment: a death order
Marked with red insignia
& the jeweled dagger from my belt

Alfonso, my mirror self
The black-hooded automaton awaits you in the hall

— Andrew Joron

CLARION '91

The 24th Clarion Workshop in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing will be sponsored by Lyman Briggs School at Michigan State University from June 23 to August 3, 1991.

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MINOTAURESS
by Darrell Schweitzer
art: George Barr

The author currently works as an editor for the magazine Weird Tales *and agent for the Owlswick Literary Agency. He is also a regular contributor to* Amazing® Stories. *His previous stories in our magazine include "Continued Lunacy" (March 1983), "A Lantern Maker for Ai Hanlo" (July 1984), "The Last of the Shadow Titans" (July 1985), "Transients" (January 1987), "The Shaper of Animals" (July 1987), and "The Last Dangerous Lunacy" (September 1988).*

It begins, as always, with the stirring of my womanly parts. The human portion of my body yanks my dreaming mind back across thousands of miles, away from the marvelous fair in the equally marvelous country of my dreams that is called France. One minute I am dressed as a great lady, in veils and fine gown, attended by many servants. The sun is hot, the sky a brilliant blue, the crowd around me chattering with countless voices. Jesters leap and tumble. A colorful madman in rags and streamers staggers above the crowd on stilts. A column of knights in full armor rumble by, pennons flapping from their lances. One by one the knights salute me, for in this dream-France I am a famous lady indeed.

Then I am hauled in, like a fish on a line. Here. Into this dark place that smells of earth and ancient stone.

Here. The pain-that-is-also-pleasure sears through my flesh like a rivulet of molten iron. Memories arise, too many at once, like a flock of screeching birds, like many-colored paints stirred into a pot, and I awaken in utter darkness, momentarily befuddled, as if my tens of centuries of life are not sufficient to accustom me to this place.

I listen, very carefully, for the expected sound, and there it is, as faint as a single drip of water at first, then a patter, again and again and again, a torrent, louder even than the murmurous riot of that fairground crowd in my beloved dream-France.

The sounds are echoes, striking, rebounding, striking, rattling through the walls of the great labyrinth that is my home, the entirety of my waking world. Sometimes a single piece of plaster falling can re-echo for hours. I have never learned to tell how *old* a noise is by merely listening to it. But I know from these particular sounds that I have company, that the intruders might have been inside the labyrinth for half a day.

My body stirs in an odd mixture of lust and hunger, gladness and fear. I rise from the soft, dry dirt that is my bed. On hands and knees, I shake my

flesh clean. My breasts drag along the floor.

The sounds again. Words now, in some language I know from my centuried dreams. One voice is loud, supremely confident, the other cringing — like a little boy who's been beaten and is pleading not to be beaten again. Yes, they are male voices. I can tell that much, whatever the distance.

The weak voice wants to retreat, to desist from whatever it is they are to do.

Ah, my sweet ones, it is entirely too late already, for is this not the labyrinth built by the peerless Daedalus, which may be only confounded by a ball of yarn? You didn't bring any knitting supplies on your little expedition, did you? No, I thought not.

Grunting, I heave myself upright, one hand against the wall, my massive body unsteady on such tiny, cloven-hoofed feet. I lumber forward, shoulder and thigh scraping niter from the wall; ungainly, yes, for am I not a monster like all my kind?

I find my two guests in Death's Waiting Hall, where the twisting tunnels open out into a spacious, pillared room. Light filters in from some deftly concealed skylight far above, illuminating little. The place is positively thick with shadows. For all my thousand and some years of habitation, there are still secrets of this place unknown to me. I have never found that skylight.

One of the intruders holds a torch aloft. The two of them recoil in horror at the decor: the bones and armor of fallen warriors, an untidy heap of swords and greaves and breastplates, plumed helmets gone to rust, even one or two full suits of metal like the torchbearer wears; and among them all countless bones, shattered arms, splintered ribs, vertebrae and teeth like dice thrown in some forgotten game. There are more skulls than I could ever count, even many centuries back when counting and reassembling these remains was a hobby of mine. And among them, sacred and untouched, lies the huge skeleton of the progenitor of my race, Asterius, who died here, slain by Theseus.

I bow my massive head, lowing softly, spittle dripping from nose and lips, my horns swaying slowly from side to side.

Like the madman on stilts, I stagger forward.

The cringing fellow screams, "Holy Mother of God save us! A monster!" He tries to flee, but the armored man grabs him by the scruff of the neck like a cat hauling a kitten, swings him around to face me, and forces the torch into his hands.

"Hold this, you idiot! It's going to be *easy*. . . ."

He slides his sword from his scabbard with a rasping sound, and advances. Yes, it is so easy. I stand there, stupidly, my head swaying, my breasts rolling, until he is very close. For all his bravado, he is amazed at the sight of me. He stares, wide-eyed. His breathing is harsh and heavy. But he does not hesitate, and draws his arm back, ready to plunge the sword into my vitals.


G. Barr

Then faster than his eye can follow I lash out with one hoof, smashing his right leg, all but severing it. He screams. His sword flies off to join my disorderly collection. Down he tumbles, blood spurting, but before he hits the floor I hook him under the chin with my right horn and fling him across the room like a ragged sack of bones. The thud of him striking the far wall echoes and re-echoes for several minutes like the sound of thousands of hands beating softly on hide drums. Gradually it subsides, like the sighing of the sea.

All this while the other intruder just stands there, his mouth agape. The torch crackles. Glowing cinders drop to the floor.

This room is well named. Death resides here, among the pillars. The two of us converse sometimes. I think he likes to rest in the dark between his labors. There is a truce between us, for I am the last on all the earth of my kind or any of the related, ancient kinds who may not die until slain.

Therefore Death waits on me here, and when it pleases me, I grant him audience or even, occasionally, an offering. I look for him now. Something shifts in the distance, but I think it is only a shadow or a trick of the eye.

I am alone with my remaining guest, who is short and dark compared to his companion. He seems little more than a boy. As I approach, his reaction is startling.

"Holy Theotokos, Mother of God, pray for me now at the hour of my death —!"

He screams and drops to his hands and knees, repeating something I cannot follow. His torch rolls away among the bones. As I stand over him, I realize that his speech has changed. Where before he spoke some language I knew only from dreams, now, as his voice occasionally surfaces from the babble, his language is distinctly *Greek*; but not the flowing, musical Greek of Ulysses and of the honey-mouthed assassin Theseus. No, the words are strange, dark, the accent distorted like something echoed in the depths of my labyrinth. But *Greek*, actually spoken rather than dreamed.

Like some ancient Greek who might conceivably worship me.

I reach down and touch him on the shoulder, but he recoils, rolling until he is some distance away, sitting with his back to the wall.

"Holy One —"

Now it is I who kneel, because it is painful to be on my feet for very long. I crouch down, spreading my legs apart, and I lean forward, supporting the heavy, upper part of my body with my arms. I hiss softly through my bovine nostrils.

"You call me holy —"

He waves his hands frantically, as if swatting bees. "No! No! You are a devilish monster! Mother of God —!"

"But you called *me* holy, as I am in a little way descended from a divine ancestor." I mean, not Asterius, but Poseidon's bull.

He has no answer to that. I lean over farther and gaze into his eyes. Mine

are my best feature, purest azure, like the pure summer skies of my dream-France. They startle most people into paralysis.

The boy is calmed by them.

"You *know* who I am," I say softly.

He gulps, then forces himself to speech. "I know you are a creature out of an old tale. I never believed it before now, not even when I — when Guildo and I" — he glances over at his former companion — "when we uncovered the entrance to this place —"

"Uncovered it? Does not the entrance to the labyrinth stand clearly marked, behind the altar in the garden of the palace of King Minos?"

He is more puzzled than afraid. Good. I've got him talking.

"L-Lady, we followed rumors, what the country folk told us, and he had to dig to find the opening, in a mound overgrown with trees and haunted by vipers."

"Ah." Somehow it almost figures. I range far and wide in my dreams, but in waking life, of course, I have never been outside. I have no idea what changes the eons have wrought in the immediate neighborhood.

"Yet you came here."

"Yes." It was obviously a difficult confession for him to make, as if of a great crime. "Guildo came . . . for gold. To steal. I came . . . to die."

"Do you despise life so much after so short a time, child?"

He bows his head and speaks very softly. I must lean forward, straining to hear. "Lady, I am almost twenty."

"The blinking of an eye, then."

"I am a worthless traitor, Lady. I do not deserve to live any longer. Yet no Christian may take his own life, even if he is already damned. Therefore I thought . . ." Once more his gaze rests upon the fallen Guildo.

"You thought to end up like him."

"Something like that."

"Explain yourself, child. This is most extraordinary."

Again, his reaction is likewise extraordinary. He slumps to the floor and begins to weep. Between his sobs I make out snatches of the story, how an Emperor Isaac was cruelly blinded by an Emperor Alexius, and a Prince Alexius, son of Isaac, who was to become Emperor Alexius, went into barbarian lands for aid, whereupon the Franks — I cannot believe they were the same as the French of my dreams — drove one Alexius away and made another emperor, but strife arose between them and yet another Alexius slew the former one, I'm not sure which —

"Stop! My head spins. Your words are all a-jumble. What is your name anyway, child?"

"Alexius."

I sigh, and my mind drifts back over many years. "I remember a time when everyone seemed to be named Gaius. It was terribly confusing." I laugh gently, snorting, and that, perhaps, shocks him even more than the

color of my eyes.

"But now great Constantinopolis, the heart of the world, the city of the Romans, is fallen to the Franks. The great treasures of mankind, all the beautiful things gathered by so many emperors, are now burnt or carried off or melted down to make coins for barbarian soldiers. And when this happened, where was I? Was I there to defend the city and die? No, I was on the wrong side!"

Human politics are more labyrinthine than my labyrinth. But there is more to this story than politics. One of such an age as almost-twenty does not come to death-seeking grief over politics.

"You loved someone very much," I say.

He looks at me, amazed, as if I can read his mind. I try to smile, but my face is not built for smiling.

"There was a girl. Eudocia —"

"Ah . . ."

"We were to be wed. But I left her, to go off and serve Alexius — the prince — and his father the Emperor Isaac Angelus. I would come back rich, I told her. I would be a great lord. But —"

"But things did not work out as you expected."

Once more he sobs. "No, Lady, they did not."

"They never do, Alexius. Now tell me the rest of the story."

"I suffered for my prince, in prison, and for his father. Then I escaped, and escaped again when they both were dead, but the Franks caught me. I should have died then. But Guildo spared me, if I would swear service to him. The world was ending. My lords were dead. I thought I had nothing more to lose. My death would serve no purpose. So I swore. And then the final assault came and the city was violated, there I was, a servant of the barbarians, watching from the deck of a Venetian galley, a worthless traitor —"

"I think you have grown very old in your nearly twenty years, Alexius. But perhaps you are over-ambitious when you take the world's burdens onto yourself."

". . . then Guildo quarreled with a knight over a share of the loot and killed the man, and was outlawed, so the two of us fled here, to Crete, where still our enemies dogged us. We forced our way into farmhouses, demanding shelter. More than once we murdered when we thought we were betrayed. Then, one night, as we hid in some ruins, I told him the story . . . of your kind . . . and it seemed to drive him mad. He was crazed with the idea of stealing the treasures of this place. I wasn't so sure there would be any treasures. Didn't Lord Theseus bear them away?"

"Only what he could carry."

"So here we are." Once more he is weeping. He lies on his side, his face in the dirt. "Now you will kill me, Lady. Now you will kill me." He seems drained of all fear, merely states what he takes to be an obvious fact. He is not even pleading.

"No, I will not kill you," I whisper. "You, perhaps, will find your comrade's sword and kill me, for that is the way of things. I am weary now and will sleep. Many of my kind are slain in sleep."

He cannot speak. His face is wet with mud and tears. I crawl to him and very gently lick him clean with my long, cow's tongue, then lie down beside him.

"If only men could live as beasts, Alexius. They would be free of sorrow then."

Asterius, the great Minotaur, son of Pasiphae and the Bull from the Sea, was likewise a dreamer. There was little else for him to do during the long years of his imprisonment, between bouts of devouring youths and maidens given him in sacrifice. I think he fought in the end because he was unable to overcome his own fierce nature, but he was weary and he wanted to die. Theseus was his liberator.

Meanwhile, Asterius dreamed, and his soul wandered among the lands of men as my soul does; the last of his descendants, I am as great a dreamer as he.

I don't think mankind ever knew that there were more of us, that sometimes before he devoured them or they died of fright or madness, Asterius had his way with the maidens, that some of them actually sought union with him in their frenzy and their pain, as if it were a kind of escape. I think that we, the sons and daughters of the bull-man, were the last of the gods' secrets, one they never got around to revealing before they, too, finally died.

The boy Alexius was genuinely surprised to see me. I wasn't accounted for in the tale, as he knew it. How then did he expect to die in the labyrinth? Killed by ghosts? By his treacherous companion? Smitten by the outraged Mother of his God? I don't know. Such things confuse me, even in my dreams when I am truly alive.

So I lie beside Alexius and my soul ventures forth, into the many lives I share all over the world, opening them one by one like books in a library. I am in France again, in a castle listening to a storyteller while the curtains of rain outside the window whisper like the echoes in my labyrinth. The story is one of romance and of heroic lovers, of how for his sins a knight was commanded to love a loathly lady who was more beast than human woman. True to his vows, he did, and by his love she was transformed into the fairest of all maidens.

Yes, I know that story. The French lady remembers it, as if in a dream.

And I dream of fire, too, and of blood, and of screams in the night. I behold the great city of the Romans, Constantinopolis, burning as Frankish knights rage through the streets, slaying, raping women and boys. They quarrel like frenzied dogs over cloths and gold and the precious relics of dead holy men. It is all strange to me, something I can never understand because my nature is not entirely human.

Some of these Franks were men the French lady had known as gentle poets and lovers, now transformed by their greed into beasts, into monsters.

My spirit wanders. In still stranger lands, men from East and West battle one another for the honor of the same god, a single god intolerant of all others, whom each faction knows by a different name.

Has it not always been the way of men to fight?

Then I return over the waves, walking like a lady of smoke, like a ghost. Once I near a ship that reminds me of a huge centipede, crawling in the moonlight on its hundred oars. When they spy me, the sailors cry out. They plead for succor, whether from me or against me I never know.

Homeward, then. Crete has changed since the old days. There are castles now, and squat, tumble-down villages, and the Franks camp over the whole land like a cloud of locusts come to rest. The palace of King Minos I cannot find, not even the mound the boy spoke of. So I must return to the labyrinth, into the darkness, and awaken.

I gaze up at a single star through the untraceable skylight. They boy has made no attempt to slay me or to get away. He lies asleep, with one arm around my middle.

I know what I have to do.

"Alexius, get up." I nudge him gently with my nose, then crawl a little ways off, to give him room.

"What? Huh? What does my Lady require?"

I laugh again. He seems less shocked by my laughter this time. "You would serve me now?"

"I dreamed that you had changed, that you were a beautiful lady —"

"Alexius, you sound like one of those mooning, Frankish poets."

"Perhaps, my Lady."

"Very well, then. I command you to lead me out of this place, into the world, for I have seen it only in my dreams and long to know it in the flesh. Alexius, can you imagine how it is to have worn beautiful clothing only in my dreams, to have eaten at the banquet table only in dreams, and to somehow be kept warm and strong that way? I did not starve, subsisting on dreams, but I have not flourished either. Somehow your arrival motivates me . . . because in my nearly two thousand years I have not seen and touched what you have in nearly twenty."

He sits against the wall, silent.

"Very well then," I say. "We shall go now."

"Lady, I cannot lead you."

"Would you disobey me already? Maybe you *are* a worthless traitor, after all."

I expect him to weep at that, but he is defiant. "It isn't that. I simply *don't know the way*."

"Ah, you forgot the ball of yarn."

For an instant he is puzzled, silent, but he knows the old stories as well as he knows his own name, for he is a Greek, not a Frank, and the answer comes to him. "Yes, that is it."

"I know the way. Before now, I have merely been unable to follow it."

So we walk for miles, around and around in the labyrinth King Minos commanded Daedalus to build in order to contain the royal embarrassment, my ancestor. I lean on the boy's shoulder, since it is difficult to so burden my puny hooves and ankles. We stop to rest many times.

Once, I ask him about the wars.

"Christian men take up the cross," he says, "and go fight the pagans."

"These pagans, are they like Persians?"

"They worship Mahomet."

"And what is that?"

"A demon, some say, who sleeps in a coffin that hovers between heaven and earth. Others say he was a prophet."

"I knew a prophet once. His name was Tiresias. Blind. But he saw very clearly, for all the good it did him."

We pass through richly furnished, canopied rooms. There is much luxury in this labyrinth, for Asterius was, after all, the son of a king. But these chambers are near the outer part of the maze, and the resounding echoes make them unbearable for very long, through either the malice or negligence of Daedalus. Only in the heart of the labyrinth is there any quiet. Only there can one dream.

"And what will you do in the world, Lady?"

"I shall go to France. I have dreamed of it."

"Men will fear to behold you."

"Perhaps not."

Onward, as the accumulated echoes of our speech and movements thunder after us like an angry mob driving us forth into the unknown.

It is like a birth, at the very last. I hold back. I am afraid. I feel a kind of pain I never knew could exist. The great bronze doors guarding the labyrinth are long gone. The corridors slowly blend into caves, then ravines, and at last there is a naked sky over us, and I am unable to go on.

He takes me by the hand, gently but firmly, and leads me up onto a hilltop among some olive trees. There we sit, looking out over the sea.

Spring flowers sway in the gentle breeze. What astonishing things are the flowers, how incredible the breeze.

"And what will you do in the world, Alexius?" I ask him finally.

"Nothing, Lady. I have nowhere to go. There is nothing for me."

"No one may know how his life is to be spun, Alexius, or measured, or cut. Do not blame yourself."

"Lady, in serving you, I do penance for my many sins."

"You don't really believe that, do you, child?"

"If I believe anything at all, yes, Lady."

"As you wish then."

So we wait until nightfall and emerge by moonlight, out of the trees, and walk along a road, meeting a single shepherd who falls to his knees at the sight of us. Then we come to town and there, indeed, as Alexius had prophesied, men flee in terror. He leads me to a boat. I sit in the narrow stern while he rows.

What an awesome thing the ocean is. On the water and under the stars, I tell him the rest of my story, how, it is said, creatures such as myself can become fully human if only someone can see the humanity in them. Asterius remained a monster, in effect, because he was not loved. That was the source of his rage. That was why he wanted to die in the end. There was enough of the man in his heart for that.

I tell Alexius the story I heard in the windswept castle, from the mooning, Frankish poet.

"I know it too," he says, letting go of the oars. For a time the boat drifts, and the two of us see there while the moon sets into the water. Then, in the darkness he leans forward, careful not to capsize the boat, puts his arms around me as far as they can reach, and kisses me gently on my monstrous lips. For that instant, perhaps, he does not see me as misshapen at all.

Much later we hail a ship and are taken to another island, and to another, and another, to the growing wonder of the inhabitants. We travel through many lands, and the tales of us always precede our coming. Great crowds greet us in every town. Lords command us to attend them in their castles. We are the miracle and prodigy of the age.

I run my hands through my long, golden hair. That is marvel enough. Ladies show me how to comb it. I spend long hours gazing at my pale face in a mirror. That, too, is a marvel, for which men call me vain. Still, my eyes are by best feature, startling even when the sailors first found me naked but for Alexius's cloak.

My body is so light now, like a cloud. I move so freely. A marvel.

As for my beast-man, he goes before me always, frightening then delighting onlookers with his clumsy tricks, rowing my boats, bearing my luggage, leading my horse. When we come to the France of my dreams, it is I who lead him into the fair, though, with a leash around his neck. He holds back, afraid. I whisper gently in his ear.

I don't know if he can understand words any longer. I think he is forgetting that he was once Alexius, who sorrowed. Perhaps one day I shall kiss him on his terrible lips to remind him, summoning him back into himself.

Perhaps.

I run my fingers through my golden hair. ✪

Refractions

Patrick Lucien Price

Had someone predicted five years ago that I would be asked to serve as editor of *Amazing® Stories*, I probably would have laughed, assuming that such a dream could not possibly come true. Well, it did, and for this long-time fan of science fiction, the opportunity to edit the world's oldest SF magazine has been both a joy and an honor. Yet, as is the nature of all things, each adventure in life has both a beginning and an end; so with this issue of *Amazing Stories* concludes my editorship. Though I feel sad about ending this phase of my life, I'm also pleased that the quality of stories, essays, poems, and artwork that have appeared in *Amazing Stories* has brought the name of the magazine back into a place of respect and recognition in the SF/fantasy field. This feat, however, could not have occurred without the help of so many.

First, I thank all the authors, poets, and essayists who honored *Amazing Stories* with their unique insights, feelings, and beliefs. Without their vision of what life in the universe is or could be, without their devotion to and understanding of the power of words, the magazine could not have thrived as a significant voice in the SF field. I offer special thanks to Greg Benford, Sheila Finch, Bob Frazier, Bob Silverberg, George Zebrowski, and all the gang in Eugene, Orgeon, and in the Twin Cities for their words of encouragement as I sought to honor my editorial vision of *Amazing Stories*.

Second, as the written word both inspires and entertains, so too does the visual image. And so I express my gratitude to all the artists who offered their paintings and illustrations to *Amazing Stories*: Janet Aulisio, George Barr, Bob Eggleton, Brad W. Foster, Daniel Horne, John Lakey, Terry Lee, Jean Elizabeth Martin, Robert Pasternak, Roger Raupp, Martin Springett, and the late Hank Jankus.

Third, to Roger Moore, Barb Young, Gaye O'Keefe, and the folks here at TSR, Inc., who assisted me with evaluating and copyediting manuscripts, proofreading galleys, and the various tasks of magazine production, I'm delighted to have shared these experiences and our friendship. And especially to Martin Greenberg — a wonderful friend and teacher — many, many thanks!

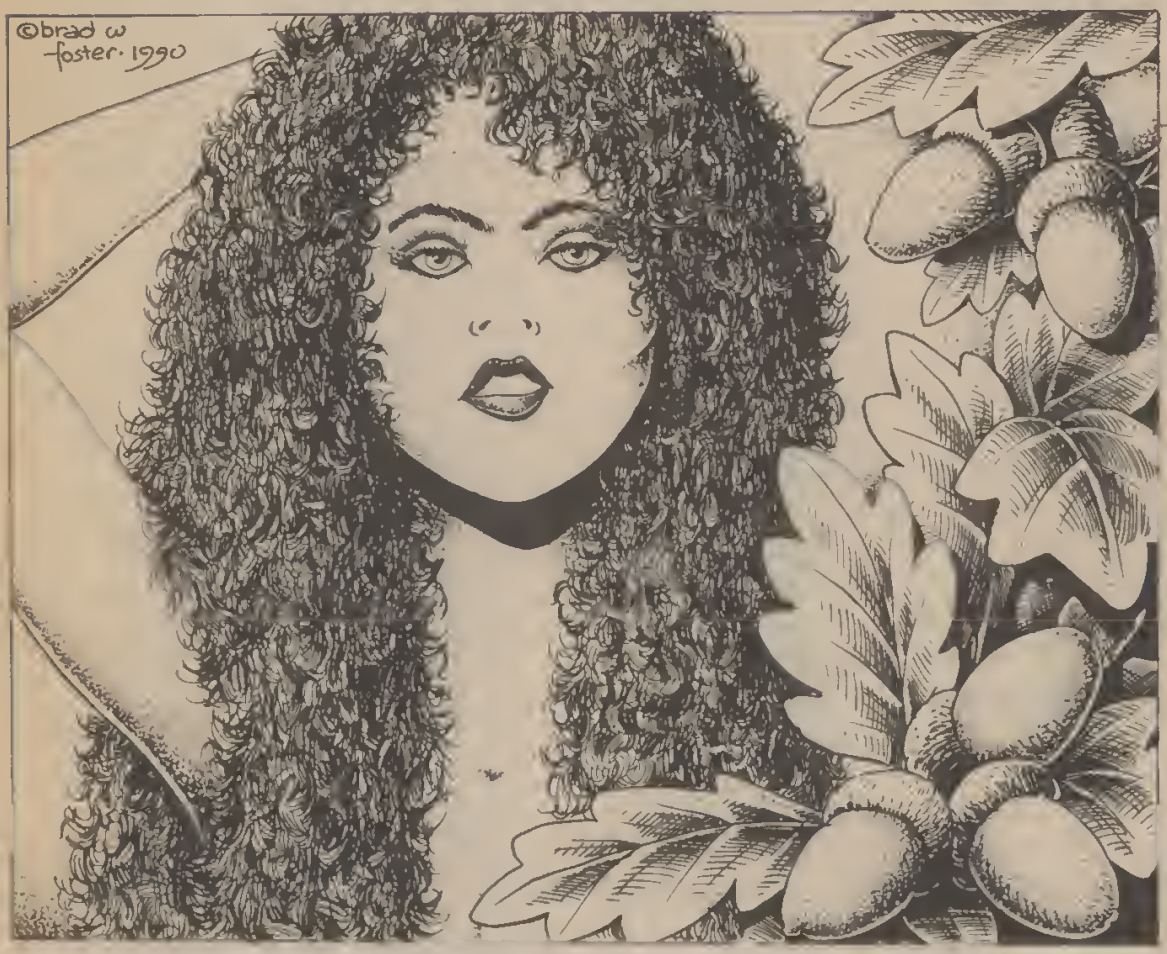
Fourth, and most importantly, to the readers of *Amazing Stories*, I'm thankful that you have supported the magazine by reading it and sharing your thoughts through your letters and postcards. Without you, my friends, the voice of *Amazing Stories* would have remained mute. As *Amazing*'s format evolves throughout the coming months under the editorial direction and talents of Kim Mohan, I ask that you continue your support so that the Grandfather of SF magazines remains the sage, not the senile member, of our literary community.

Once again, thanks, and best wishes to all.

URSULA REDUX

by Kij Johnson and Phillip C. Jennings

art: Brad W. Foster



Kij Johnson has just moved from Eugene, Oregon, to New York City. She attended the 1987 Clarion West Writer's Workshop. She has sold fiction to Pulphouse, Twilight Zone Magazine *and* Weird Tales. *This is her first* Amazing *sale.*

Phillip C. Jennings is the chthonic, midwestern, risk-avoiding half of the Kij/Phil writing team, and right now he's happily working on Mars — a Mars novel, that is.

The man who opened the door was tall and thin, with high cheekbones under angry eyes. His worn dark pants and white T-shirt were stained with paints. He scowled at the scarfed head of the woman at the door. "Well?" he asked, dragging the brush in his hand across a dirty rag.

"Teve Genoa?" the woman asked.

"What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you about one of your paintings."

"I'm painting now. Get the hell out of here."

"No," she said. "I'm coming in."

Genoa stabbed the brush at the cloth. "Five minutes, then I throw your ass out." He turned and walked inside. The woman followed him through the dark hallway into a huge two-story room filled with fading northern light. Giant canvases were stacked with their faces toward the white walls. A half-finished painting, great angry slashings of unpleasant colors, hung against one wall. In front of it hunched a draped chair covered with sketchbooks and half-used tubes of pigment, pencils and charcoals. Teve stalked to stand beside the chair and stare up at the painting, his back turned to the woman.

"Well?" he said.

"Look at me."

"I'm not going to lose what little daylight there is left because some bitch horns in on me."

"*Look at me,*" she snapped.

"Shit." He pivoted on his heel. She pulled the plain scarf from her head and dropped it on the floor, shook free the oceans of black hair that coiled around her face in coarse curls. The light was starting to fade, but the broad bones of her face were still clear, as were the eyebrows that met over her nose. He opened his mouth, then shut it abruptly, frowning.

"Say it," the woman said, her voice harsh. "Tell me what you were going to say."

"Nothing."

"I know what it was. Remember *Ursula*? Twenty-six years ago you painted it. The woman in the painting, the nude under the stars? Wearing the goddamn pendant? Why do I look so much like her? Who was she, Teve Genoa?" She spat out his full name as if it were an insult.

"You look a bit like the painting, but you're not her."

"In the brochure for the show? Your picture. I've got her hair and eyebrows, but it looks like I got your cheekbones, and the skinny build, of course. So who was she? What artist's model did you fuck to produce me?"

"Blackmail? Are you threatening to blackmail me? You think I'm afraid to submit to DNA testing? I can't have fathered you," Teve said decisively. "I took care of that possibility three hundred years ago. Art or babies — I chose art."

"Tubes grow back together: it's a blind cellular imperative. It happens

sometimes, and in your case . . ." Her voice turned bitter. "There were so many, sooner or later the odds would catch up with you. Once I figured you were my father, I did some reading. *The New Voice* didn't pull any punches. I expect it's hard for you to remember my mother. One face in the crowd." She laughed shortly.

He pushed the materials off the draped chair onto the floor and sat down heavily. "Jesus. *Ursula.*"

"That was her name, *Ursula*?" The woman mimicked his voice. "They executed her when I was an infant. Of course." She turned to pace the length of the darkening room, her voice rising and falling as she walked. "A new birth in spite of the quotas — and therefore somebody's legal kill. Hard to imagine a big enough bribe, so I'm guessing whoever played obstetrician called the police, and the police went down their list. The next eligible licensee showed up to turn her in, and got the estate — was there much of one? — in trust for her own child-to-be. Legal reproduction. Not illegal, like me."

A pause. "You, you shit, never did anything. Father, lover — you never cared. But I know she did. She left me a letter. *I was her death*, and she talked about that: how I shouldn't feel guilty. Oh — this too. This was in the envelope." She was close to Teve and dragged something from around her neck. "Go on, take it, it's in the painting. Maybe it'll help you remember her out of the crowds of fucking art groupies. I just want to hear something. To know . . ."

Teve took the necklace from her outthrust hand, her fingers shaking slightly. From a long silver chain hung a locket wrapped in oak leaves carved out of three colors of gold and studded with tiny acorns carved of carnelian. He sprang the tiny catch. Inside lay a curl of coarse black hair. "Ursula," he whispered again.

"So who was she?"

"There's nothing I can tell you," he said wearily, rubbing at his face.

"You owe me this — *Father.* Tell me."

He sat back, inspecting his paint-smeared loafers. "She wasn't a model. I don't know what or who she was. I hadn't been able to paint for a while, nothing good anyhow. So I went to the Rockies to hike alone. To die, maybe. I felt my centuries and was tired of life."

She shifted restlessly, but said nothing.

"There was this meadow in the forest," he continued. "Knee-deep grass, a stream that ran across it. Coyotes on the other side. One looked over its shoulder at me, went along a ways, looked again — like that until he was gone. So I stayed there. The stars were very bright — no moon —" Teve stopped, his eyes aimed absently at the canvas on the wall. Its ugly colors were fading in the twilight.

"My mother," the woman's voice broke through his thoughts. "It's her I want to hear about."

"She came there, white in the starlight. I'll never forget her like that. Tall, big-boned, that cloud of hair. Eyebrows like yours. Like the painting. With that locket. I suppose her tent was farther back in the woods. God, she was beautiful. She smiled at me and stretched out her arms.

"We made love. Afterward, we washed in the stream. Jesus, it was cold. The water on her skin glowed silver from the stars. I started spilling out everything, about how I couldn't paint anything new. Three centuries, and I'd used up everything inside me. After a while I wanted her again. I told her that we could go back to Santa Cruz and she could inspire me. She indulged me that entire weekend, listening while I talked foolishness, hardly talking herself, but I guess all fantasies come to an end. She had her own life. I did the prelims for *Ursula* on Sunday, and Monday morning she was gone."

"It's your only painting that will last." The voice in the darkness startled Teve, who had forgotten the woman's presence. "She died, but she'll last longer than you do, on that canvas. The rest of your stuff is shit."

"I've done my best work since then."

"It's all bad. You've never cared enough about anything else to paint well." Her voice changed. "Your whole life is without caring."

"Oh no," Teve said softly. "I care a lot."

"Why didn't you take out a license? At least *try* to find a kill to give me room to be born and still leave Ursula alive?"

"I couldn't. Even if I'd known. Even if she'd said I was the one." Teve swallowed against the pain that threatened to close his throat. "I'm a pacifist."

"Bullshit. Your paintings are vicious. Your life is full of brawls and whores."

"What *could* I do? What *could* I paint? How else could a feeling man live? This is a world where a person must kill — excuse me — *make a successful capital charge* — to open a place for a son or daughter. That's the price we pay for immortality. Murder, legal murder. You wonder why I'm angry? At least what I create requires no deaths. I'll leave no children behind, when I do die at long last, but my hands will be clean."

"You'll leave one."

"I'm not your father. Your mother could have had many men. As many as she wanted, I think. Some without vasectomies; she didn't ask. A wild risk, maybe, but —"

"But what?"

Teve felt shock at the idea. "I was tired of life, and I think she was even older than I. She helped my juices kick in again, but maybe nobody could return the favor. Maybe she was ready to pay the price of your birth. Whoever your father is, your mother didn't want you to find him. Of all her liaisons, mine is the only one you've got evidence for, thanks to that locket, to the painting." He stopped suddenly. "That's all you want, isn't it? A fa-

ther's estate — *any* father's estate, bought by blood."

The woman nodded. "I was born with — with a hunting license. That's what happens in cases like mine. The person who turned Ursula in got her property, her place in the sun. It's my father's estate that will lift me out of poverty. *You* killed her — it's only fair."

"You can live without finding your father. The laws are brutal, but not that brutal. Make your own money, find your own home."

Her footsteps crossed the dark studio toward the entrance hall. "How long has it been since you've been poor? You, or anyone you know? You, the legal billion, with the world chopped nicely into a billion parcels so you can be rich and whine about getting tired of life! Imagine what it is to be placeless, faceless, loveless, hidden away in lost corners — you called me a bitch. You don't know how right you are!" She stopped in front of a low glass table; a pale abstract sculpture glowed dimly there. "Nice house you've got. Nice estate for the one who turns you in. They'll be out in the morning to take DNA samples. It's like you say: I'm licensed to make a capital charge, that you've fathered me without making a legal kill. And if they find you guilty — well, that's *my* legal kill."

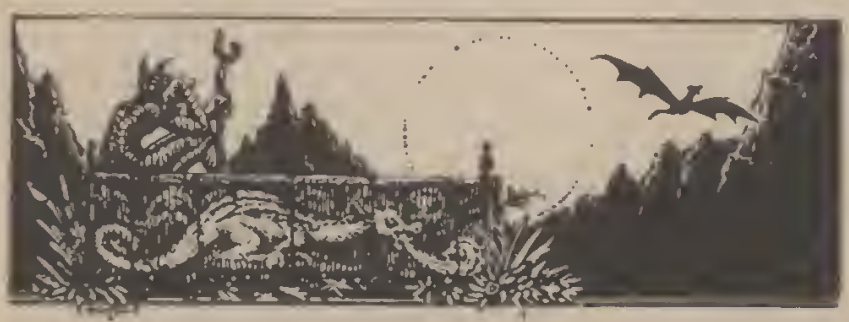
"So you'd take all this away from me." His gesture took in the dim studio. "My art, my life — will you use your future centuries as well as I might do? Do you have a gift?"

Her answer came from beyond the room. "Not even that, damn you. You might have given me talent, the talent you waste on this shit that pains my eyes. I could make my own way in the world, then."

"If you are mine, then I've produced an ugly thing indeed." Teve's voice dropped.

The only answer was a door opening and closing, and silence.

After nearly an hour, Teve turned on the lamp by the draped chair. It gave only a small pool of light. A sketchbook lay facedown on the floor by his foot. He fished it free of the mess and began a careful sketch of a woman's face — a face with big cheekbones and a bar of black eyebrow. ✪



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THE DRAGON OF ALLER

by John Brunner

art: Brad W. Foster



Among other honors John Brunner has received the British Fantasy Award, the British SF Award (twice), a Hugo for the best SF novel (for Stand on Zanzibar*), a Bronze Porgie award from the* West Coast Review of Books, *the French* Prix Apollo *and* Grand Prix du Festival de l'Insolite, *the Italian* Cometa d'Argento *(twice), the* Premio Italia, *the Spanish* Gigamesh *award (for* The Jagged Orbit*), and the European SF Convention Special Award as Best Western European SF Writer.*

Recent stories of his that have appeared in our pages include "An Entry That Did Not Appear in Domesday Book" (March 1988), "Of Course There Are Martians" (September 1989), and "The First Since Ancient Persia" (July 1990).

About eleven hundred years ago, marauding Danes sailed up the River Severn, landed, and set forth to plunder the country as far as they could march before the end of summer. By autumn they were at Chippenham in Wiltshire. So proud of their conquests were they, so convinced the Saxons whom they preyed on could never band together and drive them out, that their leader Guthrum proposed they spend the winter in Britain instead of going home as was the usual custom. It was agreed.

But there were some determined to prove the Danes were wrong. One was Alfred, King of Wessex, though none knew where he hid. Another was a tall lean youth called Jack.

He lived on a farm in a clearing among thick woods. At this time of year one of his daily jobs was to drive swine into the next valley so that they might fatten on beech-mast and acorns. One day at noon the wind, which all morning had blown past him towards the farm, suddenly changed, and bore with it not only shouts and screams but the stench of burning. Staring upward between the treetops, he saw with alarm a vast plume of smoke.

His swine forgotten, he rushed to the brow of the hill.

The Danes had arrived. Worse, they were departing, driving before them those of the pigs and cattle they had not slaughtered, and their final act had been to fire the house and barn.

For an instant Jack was minded to run down and challenge them single-handed. Then, as the pall of smoke shifted, he realised how futile that would be. Not only were there thirty or more of the attackers; he now saw clearly that they had done their worst.

On the muddy soil of the farmyard lay not just dead livestock, but human beings too. He knew how to count. There were exactly as many as there had been people living at the farm: his father, his mother, his two sisters, the five hinds who helped to work the land. . . .

He threw himself down among concealing underbrush and for a long time

could do nothing but weep.

When the Danes were safely out of earshot, he ventured into a horror worse than any nightmare. For what seemed like eternity he toiled alone among the ruins. First, he dug graves for his family, reciting such prayers as he remembered, and with the bodies buried things the Danes had missed or not felt worth the stealing: his father's prized iron mattock, his mother's enamel cross and his sisters' combs and brooches, and a few other pitiful trinkets.

Now and then he broke off to drink from the brook, or to slash meat from one of the dead animals and char it over a small fire, in whose embers he baked meal-cakes mixed with water and wild herbs. He had little stomach for the food, but he knew he must keep up his strength.

Then on the fourth day he took an axe the looters had disdained, and headed for an ash that last year had been struck by lightning. All had expected it to die. Yet with the coming of spring it had put out new shoots, and the folk said it was a marvel. Jack knew what kind. His mother had been devout enough, but she hailed from a family that had long clung to the old ways, and it seemed to Jack that if the pagan Danes could wreak such havoc on the Christians of Britain, there might be power in them yet. And he knew how to call on it, for she had taught him.

He felled the tree by noon. From it, painstakingly, he fashioned a straight spear half as long again as he was tall. He had it in mind to bind to its tip one of the few bronze blades the Danes, preferring iron, had left behind, or even — if worse came to worst — a nail.

But before that, the power must be given to the wood.

Having smoothed it, first with a knife, then with sand wrapped in leather, he set about colouring the haft.

With oil, with glue made from boiled bones and hides, with soot and dried blood and green and yellow glass from vessels that the Danes had broken, ground to powder in a mortar, he contrived paint of four necessary colours.

Using a hazel twig chewed until its end was a brushlike mass of fibres, he banded the wood: first black, to indicate a storm cloud; next yellow, the hue of lightning; then brown, like the bare earth of winter; and lastly green, the symbol of new life.

As he worked, he spoke soft words. Perhaps he did not quite remember the charms accurately, but he felt the force of his rage would make up for that.

When he had finished, he was tired out. Thrusting the spear into the ground to let it dry upright, he leaned his back against a charred post and fell asleep.

Not long after, for it was still daylight, he woke with a start. To his utter amazement, he saw that a travelling smith had set up his forge in the middle of the ruined farmstead and was reaching with his tongs into a charcoal fire on the ground beside him. It glowed so brightly that Jack could scarcely

look at it.

The smith, a short thickset fellow with a gnarled dark face, dressed all in leather, nodded to him and called good day as he laid on his anvil the object he had drawn from the fire. Though small, it too shone with amazing brilliance. Taking a short-handled hammer, he began to beat it into shape.

Fresh rage boiled up in Jack's throat. How callous this stranger must be, to work unconcerned amid such devastation! What right did he have to ply his trade here?

Snatching at his spear, finding that its paint was dry, he levelled it at the smith. He tried to speak, but his mouth was so dry he could barely whisper.

"That's a handsome job you've made of the haft," the smith said, tap-tapping away. "But a spear's no use without its head." He gave his handiwork a critical, squinting glance and laid his hammer by. "Here — take this!"

He picked up the object he had made and tossed it at Jack. By reflex the boy made to catch it before realising that it must still be hot.

But it wasn't. It was already cool.

Astonished, he let it rest on his palm and stared at it. It was a spearhead, beautifully patterned with ridges like the veins of a sallow leaf, and with its tip so sharp that when he bent a finger to it blood ran on the instant.

"It's good work," murmured the smith. "Though I say so myself. I'm little called upon to show my skills these days, but I wager you'll find it serviceable for the task you're fated to undertake. Well, I'll be on my way."

"Wait!" shouted Jack, tearing his gaze from the marvel with vast effort. "You can't just —"

But at that moment a gust of wind blew smoke from the fire straight at his face and blinded him with stinging tears. When he could see again, there was no trace of the stranger save a heap of grey cold ashes that might have come from the burning of the farm.

A shiver of awe crept down Jack's spine. He knew who that smith must have been.

When he set the spearhead to its haft, it fitted as though it had been grown there.

Next morning he packed a leather scrip with slices of meat not yet maggot-ridden, and a few handfuls of meal, and set forth westward, on the trail of a rumour of resistance as faint and distant as the rustle of bare branches in the breeze.

It was a dreary journey. Mist clung about the road, or chilly winds assailed him, as though the land itself were as oppressed as its people.

After many days, at the hilltop town of Somerton — the capital of this western kingdom before its king had himself been driven into hiding — he came among folk who understood his errand. A certain Osbert said to him:

"Indeed, in the land between here and the ocean stand hills that even in

the worst of winters are not drowned by floods. Therefore, men call them 'ey', as Thorney, Isle of Thorns, and Muchelney, the Great Island. There, and on the paths and tracks that thread the marsh, you will find none but our own Saxon kind. It's said the boldest of the curst invaders will not dare the bogs and forests of Somerset, for fear of those who have taken refuge there, awaiting the return of the king."

"I shall join them," said Jack. There was fury in his voice and eyes. Those who spoke with him should have been angry too, but they were more afraid, for in the past the Danes had gone home for the winter, and the news that this year they were staying caused much dismay, to the point where such folk seemed frightened of any stranger.

Besides, though he had said nothing about the nature of the spear he carried — this being the sort of town where it was foolhardy to mention the old beliefs — he had told them of his family's fate, and many other ruined farms and villages besides, that he had come on as he made his way hither. He had travelled mostly by night, hiding by day in cattle sheds and sheepfolds, begging a morsel of bread here and a cup of milk there, enough to keep him going.

But hunger and exertion had made him gaunt, like the figure of Death himself.

"Boldly spoken," Osbert answered. "But do not think of taking the shortest road. You cannot."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jack.

"Because it lies past Aller," Osbert said, as though that were sufficient explanation.

"What's at Aller, then — a camp of Danes?"

"No, something ten times worse than any Dane." It was another man who spoke up, elderly, his face lined with much suffering. "A dragon!"

"But there are none in Wessex!" Jack exclaimed.

"There's one at least!" insisted the old man.

"Saward should know," said Osbert. "He, and the other people of that village, had to flee from it."

"That's so," Saward confirmed. "It lairs in a cave under Round Hill that overlooks my old farm. First, it was small and did no more than frighten women at their milking and drink the pails dry. As it grew, it started to seize lambs and piglets. Then it took children, and at last a full-grown man."

"Did you not band together to oppose it?" Jack demanded.

"Of course we tried, but its scales were proof against our arrows, and no man could draw near enough to strike it with an axe, for the stench of its breath is poisonous. I had a whiff, and for half a day I lay gasping for air, my eyes so swollen I could not open them. So in the end" — a shrug — "it drove us all away, save one old crazy man called Ailmar, and by now he's likely dead."

"Why, then, what we must do is set forth and defeat it — dig a trap, per-

haps, and lure it in!"

"Spoken with the wildness of youth," grunted Saward. "I'm neither a saint nor a champion, and I never heard of any such in these parts in my time — or if there were some, then like the king himself they've fled the Danes!"

"But I'm set on joining those who wait for his return!"

"Do so," Osbert replied. "But choose a safer road. Go south, perhaps, and hire a boatman to take you down the river Pedret. Some boats are left, I hear."

"I have no money!"

"Well, then, best go no farther," Osbert grunted, and he and the others made to move away.

"Will none of you come with me?" Jack implored. "Surely if there were a score of us, or half a score —"

"If it's company you seek," Osbert broke in, "there was a fool who passed a while ago and scoffed as you do at the notion of a dragon. Make haste, and maybe you'll catch up with him. Then there'll be two fools on the road together. As to the rest of us, we have more sense."

With that he and Saward departed, and the others followed, shamefaced.

Jack gloomily pondered the fate of the kingdom if its people had turned coward. Still, if there was one other traveller bound on the road he planned to take, that was better than continuing alone.

Besides — a thought crossed his mind which he scarcely dared give form to — perhaps a spear whose head had been forged by the Smith of Smiths might be the weapon to outmatch a dragon. . . .

Why was he dawdling, though? He must make haste! He threw his tattered cloak about his shoulders, tightened his leggings and the thongs of his much-worn boots, and strode out of the town.

On the brow of the hill he paused, and his heart sank. Here began the great morass of the Somerset Flats, between the ridges of Mendip and Quantock, with the rivers Cary to the north and Pedret to the south — the latter tidal, so that it flooded salt and soured the ground. At this season neither was as yet in spate, but what part of the land ahead was not masked by dense woodland, alder and hazel, oak and sycamore, turning now to brown and shedding their leaves, was a waste of reed and osier. It was hard to believe anyone could make his way across such country without getting lost in the forest or sinking in a bog.

However, in plain sight although some distance ahead, there indeed was another traveller, burdened with a heavy pack. If the fellow were a pedlar, as seemed likely, to have escaped the thieving Danes he must be not only clever but well acquainted with the local roads. He might, for instance, know a path avoiding Aller.

Hoping the sight of his spear would not affright the other, he ran to catch him up.

★ ★ ★

Setting down his load, the presumable pedlar turned in response to Jack's shouting. He betrayed no sign of alarm, though his right hand stole under his cloak in a manner suggesting that he might bear a concealed knife. That cloak was no finer than Jack's, nor were his tunic and breeches; they were the clothing of a common countryman. His hood being thrown back, however, he showed a strong and handsome face. His full beard and long flowing hair made it hard to decide how old he was, but Jack judged him to be in his late twenties, ten or twelve years his senior.

"Good day!" he panted. "Do you head to the west?"

"I do so," returned the older man.

"What of the dragon that they speak of, though — the one under the Round Hill at Aller?"

The other smiled. "I too have heard that yarn. I take it to be a garbled tale disguising how the people of the village ran away from a dragon-prowed longship. It's less shaming to make out that you fled a monster than mere men. Either that, or it's been put about by traitors taking the Danish side, who want to prevent loyal Saxons from joining the king's army by the shortest route."

Jack nodded. That sounded perfectly reasonable. "So you intend to carry on your way and pay no heed?"

"I do."

"Then shall we not travel together?" Jack proposed. "I'd be glad of someone to keep me from going astray."

"And what makes you think I know these woods and marshes better than yourself? Indeed, I was hoping you might be the one to guide me!"

Embarrassed, Jack said, "Oh, no! I come from Chippenham in Wiltshire. The Danes killed my family and burned our farm. I go to join those who await the return of the king so we may rise and hurl them back into the sea."

"A noble errand," was the instant answer. "My own is . . . not unlike."

"Then you're not a pedlar?" Jack demanded, on the verge of blushing at his own wrong guesswork.

"Ah, you mistook my pack. No, it holds not wares for sale, but books."

"Oh, you're a scholar! From some monastery that the Danes have sacked?"

"You come closer with every breath. I bear true riches which the Danes would fling aside in their mad lust for silver and gold. What price, though, may one set on knowledge?"

"Do your books tell you what road to take from here?"

"Alas, no. But, as I said, we travel in a noble cause, and heaven will light the path. Time wastes. Shall we be gone?" And he slung his pack behind him.

Jack had been wondering whether he should offer to carry it, but seeing how easily it was lifted, changed his mind. No doubt the other had eaten

better recently, and slept under sounder roofs.

He ventured, "My name is Jack. May I know yours?"

A brief hesitation: then, "You may call me Godric."

"Brother Godric?" — meaning to ask if he were a monk.

"Only insofar as all we Saxons must behave as brothers if we are ever to rid our land of the Danish plague. Put your best foot forward!"

Jack was a trifle uncomfortable at the thought that his companion was a clerk.* But with both the old and the new powers on their side, perhaps they might prevail even against the Danes — even, indeed, against dragons.

Despite the difference in their ages, and the fact that Godric carried his big pack and Jack had nothing more than his scrip, which now held a few crusts and an onion that he had been given in Somerton, the younger man sometimes found himself hard put to it to keep up. He was almost relieved when the footing grew less firm, even though it slowed their progress.

At Godric's request he told again the story of how the invaders had come to Chippenham.

"So Guthrum plans to overwinter there, does he?" Godric said eventually. "That means we have time in hand."

"Time for what?" Jack demanded.

Godric was lost in thought for a while before he answered with a shrug.

"To meet with others loyal to the king, find out how many of them there are and what weapons they have, make plans for a campaign next summer."

"You're sure there'll be one?"

"If the king has anything to do with it, there will."

"Then I shall bring my spear to serve him!"

"Yes," Godric murmured. "I've been looking at it. I notice it's painted in unusual fashion. Your own work?"

"Yes."

"Did you in fact make it?"

This was the question Jack had been afraid of. He muttered, "Yes. Except for the head, that is."

"And how did you come by that?" Godric pursued.

"I . . . I had it from a travelling smith."

"I see. What wood did you choose for the haft?"

"I cut it from a tree that had fallen in the wood near my home." Jack felt himself starting to sweat.

"No particular sort of tree?"

"A lightning-struck ash," Jack admitted.

"I see. Do the colours have significance?"

Against his will Jack explained their symbolism. When he had finished,

---

* Someone able to read and write.

Godric gave a thoughtful nod.

"I fear I know who that smith may have been. You too?"

He fixed Jack with such a commanding gaze, the boy — of a sudden he no longer felt like a young man — could not prevent himself from nodding.

"I think I may have met the Smith of Smiths."

"Weland? Or as they call him in some places, Wayland?"

"Yes."

"Then your tale smacks somewhat of the old ways, does it not?"

"And what if it does?" Jack countered bluffly. "Let any god who will come to the Saxons' aid against the Danes!"

Godric smiled in spite of himself. "I must confess, sometimes I feel that way also. The clouds ahead look threatening," he added, with a frown at the sky. "I doubt we'll make it past Aller before a storm comes on."

"You said you didn't know this country!" Jack exclaimed.

"I don't. But I have friends who gave me counsel. I'm to meet them —" He bit the last word off short. "Not today, though. Aller it must be, dragon or no dragon. My books are precious, and in a rainstorm I'd rather they lie under some kind of roof."

It was evening when they emerged from woodland on to cleared ground and saw what could only be the Round Hill. At its foot there was indeed a village. A wattle-and-daub chapel stood above on the slope, with a graveyard around it, and a dozen houses lined the street. Within view lay three large farms with barns and byres.

But it was time to bring the cattle in for milking, and there was no sign of life. Moreover, although the roofs of most of the buildings appeared sound, weeds were growing in what looked like fertile fields.

"It seems you were right to guess that dragon was a Danish ship!" Jack exclaimed.

Setting down his load, Godric surveyed the village for a while. At length he said, "All of a sudden I'm not so sure. Look again. When did you ever know Danes resist the temptation to fire a house or barn after they'd sacked it? These stand unburned."

"That's right!" Jack agreed in surprise.

Just as he spoke, the rain came pelting down. They both gasped at the shock, pulling their hoods over their heads — though Godric's chief thought was for his books, and he spared a moment to make sure his pack was properly tied before hoisting it on his back again.

He led the way forward, hand under his cloak as before. By now Jack was sure he must have a knife there.

Cautiously, they made their way along the village's one street. They had covered half its length when Godric stopped without warning.

"There's someone here," he said positively.

Jack had noticed nothing, nor did he now. He said as much.

"I heard a sound from over there." Godric pointed towards a house whose wicker door hung ajar, half off its leather hinges. "It may be a wild beast that has taken refuge, but I suspect not."

Mention of a wild beast reminded Jack about the dragon. He had levelled his spear before he thought of another and more likely explanation.

"Saward that I met in Somerton said one Ailmar had stayed in the village, a crazy old man."

"Call his name, then," Godric suggested. Jack did so.

Cautiously, a bent figure in rags appeared at the house door and answered in a querulous voice.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Godric responded with a courtly bow, shaking back his hood despite the rain.

"Poor travellers, friend, seeking shelter!"

"Are you Saxons?"

"Both of us, and loyal to King Alfred!"

The man's bleary eyes surveyed them. At last he said, "Well, you don't look like Danes. . . . Come inside."

They did so gratefully, and found themselves in a squalid hovel with a roof so low Jack had to keep his head bent. It stank as foully as a pigsty. The reek was compounded by fumes from the hearthstone, where a faggot of green wood smoldered sluggishly.

"How did you know my name?" Ailmar demanded.

"In Somerton I met your old friend Saward," Jack replied.

"Friend?" — with a curse. "No one here was my friend! They ran away and left me by myself to face the dragon!"

"Why did you stay?" Godric inquired.

"Ah!" Ailmar's expression became sly. "Well, now they're gone, you see, all this is mine, isn't it? All the land, all the houses! And not even dragons live forever, do they? Specially not if they're liable to starve to death! There aren't any more swine or sheep for it to take, and it's eaten practically all the wildfowl, too!"

Jack had to repress a start. That rang true. In country like this he would have expected to find birds aplenty — not just small ones, but swans and herons. But for several miles past they had seen none.

Ailmar was too lost in his dreams of glory, though, to notice his reaction.

"Well, you may spend the night here," he said at last. "But not in this house. This one's mine! Go to the farthest! I don't want your scent to lure the dragon here!"

"As you say," Godric answered meekly. "Though out of charity you might cede us a brand from your fire."

That much Ailmar granted. Taking the burning stick with a bow, Godric led Jack back into the rain.

"Why did you let him drive us out?" Jack demanded as they made a dash

for the end house. At least it looked reasonably intact.

"Because he's afflicted in his mind," Godric grunted. "I wouldn't care to have him start imagining he must discharge the dragon's duty for it — hmm?"

They found a crock in which to catch rainwater for drinking, made a meal from what they had with them, and at nightfall lay down on the bare ground.

Restless in spite of fatigue, Jack could not make himself comfortable. Every noise he heard, from the plash of rain to the scuttering of rats, made him think of dragons and Danes and what Godric had said about Ailmar. When the rain stopped, he did at last doze off, but felt he had only slept for a moment when he was woken again — by a scream!

He sat up, seizing his spear. Godric was as quick, and bent to the hearth, blowing up the embers to light a wisp of straw and from it an old besom to serve as a torch.

"Do you think Ailmar is riding the nightmare?" Jack ventured.

"Listen harder!" Godric whispered. "And make no sound yourself!"

There were dull thuds now, and a crash, and then a sort of horrid gurgling. A brief silence followed; then there was a plodding-rustling sound, that faded.

Holding his improvised torch ahead of him, and drawing the knife from under his cloak, Godric led the way outside.

The door of Ailmar's house had been torn completely away, and one of the posts had been cracked, though it was thick as a man's thigh. A pool of blood shone red in the torch-glow, and beside it. . . .

"I never saw a footprint like that," Godric murmured, pointing to a patch of mud beside the thrown-down door. It resembled a gigantic bird's, but four full handspans wide, with the dint of three cruel talons before and one behind. Beyond it, down the unpaved street, there were more such prints either side of a winding furrow, such as might be left by a monstrous tail.

"So there truly is a dragon!" whispered Jack.

"It seems so." Godric cast an uneasy glance into the dark. "And if it can gobble down a man. . . . We sleep no more tonight. At dawn we go in search of it."

"We two alone?" Jack cried.

"Who else is there? Besides, though my books may not tell me the best road through the marshes, they speak somewhat of dragons. Like snakes, they eat but seldom and rest afterwards for many days. We'll find it sleeping in its lair. What's more, young man, a spearpoint from the forge of the Smith of Smiths —!" He fixed Jack with a steady gaze.

"I'd thought the same myself," Jack admitted. "And . . ."

"Yes?"

Jack swallowed hard. "Before he went, the smith said something about it

being fitted for some task I'm fated to perform."

"I'm a good Christian," said Godric. "But I'm also a good Saxon. And I do not believe my people would so long have made offerings to the old gods had they not had power to aid us. Dragons, it seems to me, do not belong to the new order. That's why the pagans take them as the symbol for their ships' prows. They both belong to a dying world, full of murder and robbery. But I have a vision of peace, where every man and woman and child may dwell secure under the rule of law. Come back inside, and I'll consult my books."

Shivering, not from cold but apprehension, Jack sat by the door to keep watch while Godric turned page after page in the dim light of the fire. At last, when dawn was about to break, he stretched and yawned.

"We need to coat your cloak with pitch," he said. "We shall find some, no doubt, used for caulking boats and lining osier-baskets. And against its poison breath you must cover your face with your hood."

"How shall I see?" Jack demanded.

"You must stretch the wool, thus." Godric took off his own hood and demonstrated. "You will make out enough."

He rose. "Let's go and look for pitch."

Jack half-hoped they would find none, but there was a great pot of it in one of the abandoned houses, where someone had left a wicker boat partly mended. They warmed it by the fire until they could smear it on his cloak, which he donned back to front, covering him from shoulders to knees. By now it was broad daylight, and the dragon's trail could be seen clearly, winding out of the village and up the side of Round Hill, past the chapel.

Leaving his pack in the house, Godric led the way at first. When they came in sight of what could only be a cave in the hillside, he halted.

"From here you must go alone," he said. "Take my blessing with you, as well as the power of the Smith of Smiths."

Jack could say nothing in reply. Clutching his spear, barely able to make out the path, he went ahead. Shortly, he let out a cry.

"What is it?" Godric called in a low voice.

"I struck my foot against. . ." Jack had to bend over and grope among the thick grass. Something hard and sharp was hidden there. Raising his hood, he discovered an abandoned harrow: many iron spikes, point uppermost, on a crisscross wooden frame.

"No matter!" he said at last, and went on, heart pounding, mouth dry, palms sweating until he was afraid he might lose his grip on the spearhaft.

He reached the entrance to the cave without more event. The opening was so large and so dark, he feared he might have to venture into it blindly, and there was a pungent stench that made his throat sore even through the wool that covered his face. Taking a chance, he raised it, and let his eyes adjust.

And there was the dragon!

The cave was wide, but not deep at all — fifteen feet at most. What was terrifying, though, was that it was *full*. The dragon lay coiled within it like one of the stones so often found in this part of the country, patterned like a ram's horn, said to be snakes miraculously turned to rock.

Either side of its great spiralling body were the clawed feet whose prints they had seen in the village, far huger than any eagle's talons, and on its own back rested its sinister head, with a keen yellow eye on either side and a mouth wide enough to engulf Ailmar, or any other mortal man. From this cavernous maw, barely ajar, flickered a tongue as thick as a ship's hawser, tasting the air after the manner of serpents, and the moment a shift in the wind bore Jack's scent into the cave, the creature tensed. Instead of lying slack, its colossal muscles drew together, and its head rose and began to weave back and forth.

As soon as the mouth gaped wide —

In that moment Jack almost turned and fled. But he knew he must indeed wait until the mouth opened. Had he not been told that those thick scales, darkly gleaming like thick oil as the creature shifted with the same rustling noise they had heard last night, were proof against any arrow, and might even baffle an axe?

Therefore, he must aim where there were no scales: the eye, or the inside of the throat. And with the hood over his face, there was no way he could target on the eye.

Sluggish because of its recent feed, the dragon lifted its head as high as the cave allowed. Its jaws parted to reveal savage fangs, and a spurt of poison stung Jack's hands as he held the spear extended before him. He filled his lungs to their maximum, held his breath —

And rushed forward with all his might.

The spear sank home. The dragon howled! So it could be wounded! It wasn't magical, or immortal, as he had half feared! He wrenched the spear free, and stabbed again — and before he could strike a third time was choked and blinded. His pitch-coated cloak protected his body, but through his mask the poison seeped, not mere breath but a spray of liquid from the fangs, burning his nostrils, stinging his eyes, blistering his cheeks like a thousand nettles. He jumped back in terror and lost his footing on the muddy slope.

But for that, he realised afterwards, he would have been dead. The dragon, maddened by its wounds, had struck at where he had been standing a heartbeat before. Venom splashed anew, and where it fell the ground smoked.

Ripping off his hood, Jack rolled over, somehow clinging to his spear. When he could see again, he found that the furious monster was heaving itself out of the cave, scrabbling against the floor and walls with its vicious talons. Had it not been sorely hurt, it might already have been upon him. Struggling to his feet, Jack turned and staggered away, his eyes blazing with

pain, his throat and lungs seared until he could scarcely draw in enough air to keep going.

Dimly in the distance he heard Godric calling. He lacked the strength to reply.

Behind him came the fearful rustling, the stamp of those vast feet, the roars of anguish. What of the promise the smith had made? Had he been foolhardy enough to engage in a venture that must end with his own death?

His vision was clearing. In the nick of time he realised he was just about to stumble over the harrow. Summoning all his might, he leapt across it . . . and even as he landed, realised how he might be saved.

He turned at bay, spear levelled.

The sight of the dragon, howling, shedding blood now as well as venom from its terrible mouth, stayed with him in dreams the rest of his life. How he managed not to flee again, he never knew — unless perchance the secret lay in the spell upon his spearhaft, which had summoned Weland. But he stood his ground until the dragon was almost within striking range. Then, at the latest possible instant, he feinted with the spear and darted backward.

The dragon charged after him — and impaled its feet upon the harrow-spikes.

It tore them free, howling worse than ever, but had no other place to set them down. Striving mindlessly to move onward, it made its plight worse, for its belly dragged across the spikes as well. Flailing its tail in frenzy, it gasped and roared and raged and roared anew, until its strength gave out and with a final despairing gout of venom it slumped forward in a welter of its own gore.

Blinking away the last tears, Jack took careful aim. With all the force of storm and lightning, the power of fertile earth and green and growing things, and the sharpness of the iron blade forged by Weland, Smith of Smiths, he drove his spear clear through the dragon's head from eye to eye.

Then his knees folded under him. Had Godric not caught up with him by then and offered him support, he would have fallen headlong.

After a little while he was better, though when he tried to withdraw his spear, he found he was too weak. Godric had to free it for him. But he would not let the older man carry it as they returned down the slippery slope, though he was obliged to lean on his arm.

Neither of them said a word.

But when they arrived back at Aller, the street was no longer empty. Two horses, saddled and bridled, stood beside what had been Ailmar's house, and someone was gazing sorrowfully at the damage and the drying blood, now swarming with late flies.

Godric released Jack and darted forward. "Odda!" he shouted. "My kinsman, my alderman — Odda!"

The stranger glanced round in amazement. His jaw fell. Then he grinned

broadly and, taking a pace forward, dropped on one knee.

"Rise up!" said Godric, catching him by the hand.

Whereupon Odda embraced him fondly, saying the while, "My lord, I thought you must be dead! One of our spies in Somerton passed word by the marsh-paths that you'd been spotted there and were determined to go on alone. He was unwilling to let you know that you'd been recognised, lest some traitor might inform the Danes. But I feared for you, so rode to meet you with an extra horse. When I came on this distressing sight, you may imagine what I guessed!"

Jack listened, not understanding. What was all this about "my lord" and "one of our spies"?

"Had you not heard about the dragon?" Godric said.

Odda shrugged. "I took it for a tale intended to scare off the Danes and keep a direct route clear for loyal men making for Athelney."

"Hah! That's one idea that didn't cross my mind. But there truly was a dragon. Look yonder on the hillside — see?" He pointed. Following his arm, Odda let out a cry of amazement.

"You've conquered such a beast, my lord? Why, there's the making of a hundred ballads in your victory! Surely heaven must be on the side of such a ruler!"

Ruler? With a start, Jack glimpsed the truth.

"Not I," said the man he had known as Godric. "I'd not have undertaken such a venture, for without modesty I feel I may be too precious to my people to risk my life against any foe save Guthrum. No, it was this bold youth. Jack, come hither!"

Jack obeyed, and awkwardly made to kneel as Odda had done. A quick hand checked him.

"Not so, young man! You've proved yourself the equal of any of my warriors. . . . Ah: I said 'my', didn't I? But I think you've already pierced my disguise."

Jack nodded. From a dry mouth he said, "You can only be one person. You're the king."

"Alfred in truth I am. And by my right to reign over Wessex, I pledge you this. You'll serve at my side until we overthrow the Danes, and with that spear of yours you'll wreak great havoc on them. Then when peace returns, this shall be yours!" The king waved his arm across the land. "No more shall you be Jack from Chippenham, but John of Aller! You've earned this land by right of conquest — and a conquest of a truly noble kind, not seizing it from honest folk, but from a dragon. Come, Odda! He's been scalded by the dragon's poison and is weak. Help him to horseback. We can walk, and tell each other news."

With a king and an alderman to aid him, the new-named John of Aller bestrode a horse for the first time in his life, and all set forth once more towards the west.

In the fullness of time they came to Athelney, and wintered there, and in the spring Odda won the first of the Saxons' great victories against the Danes. By land, and at sea in ships built by Saxon craftsmen, they drove back the invader, and when the task was done, young Jack — not so young any longer — entered into the estate that Alfred gave him, and ruled Aller long and justly so that his name is to this very day remembered there.

Did it really happen?

Well, two things are definite. The first is this. If you go to the little church at Wearne, you can still see a nine-foot spear curiously painted with bands of black, brown, green, and yellow, the spear — so many say — of John of Aller. Equally, around and about, you may hear a kind of not-quite-rhyme which goes: "The Dragon of Aller/Was killed by a harrer!" — meaning "harrow," of course.

Still more certain, though — indeed, it's past a doubt — is the fact that not a single dragon has been found in Somerset from that day until this. ✪



The Future Is Near

The next issue of AMAZING® Stories will herald a new era in the long history of the magazine—and we hope you'll decide to come along into the future.

As we've announced before, the May 1991 issue will appear in a full-sized (8½" × 11") page format and will feature color illustrations accompanying every story. In addition, AMAZING® Stories will once again become a *monthly* publication—giving you twice as much great reading every year.

Even though the magazine will look drastically different from its present form, the basic content isn't going to change. We will continue to seek out and publish the very best in science fiction and fantasy short stories, featuring work by old favorites as well as new writers who are just beginning to carve out their own reputations.

The new version of the magazine will carry a cover price of $3.95, and it will be available in bookstores and other retail outlets throughout the United States and Canada. To save money and be guaranteed of receiving a copy of the magazine every month, you can order a one-year subscription (12 issues) for only $24.00. However, this special charter subscription price will only be in effect until December 31, 1990; after that date, the price of a subscription will increase to $27.00. To take advantage of this special charter subscription order, please send your name and address along with your $24.00 payment (U.S. funds only) to TSR, Inc., P. O. Box 5695, Boston MA 02206.

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If you have comments or questions about the magazine and the changes it is undergoing, please share them with us by sending a postcard or a letter to AMAZING® Stories, P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147. We will read every communication we get, respond to as many of them as we can, and use all of your feedback to help make the kind of magazine you will want to keep on reading into the 21st century.

MY VOWS WENT UNSAID

My vows went unsaid, for she is dead.
Her ring is still in my hand,
her fingers blind with the worms of the earth.

Each night I wake from my bed,
from a dream where I've said,
"*With this ring . . .*"
but I wake to the sweat and an empty bed.

In these dreams I have danced with the dead
but I scream and I scream
and my vows go unsaid
"With this ring I . . ."

Each midnight, each noon
I am endlessly consumed
with the look in her eyes
when I proposed and she cried
— an oh how *I* cried!
when the Devil in a car came
and snatched her to the tomb.
Took away her warm hand
before I could slip on the band
and say, *"With this ring I thee . . ."*

I will not be kept from my love,
my mate and my match.
So as she slept in her tomb
I called forth the procession
and had her exhumed
before friends and fiends
under the light of the moon.

Oh God! with her love I am so consumed
I had her exhumed
from the dark, dank and dreadful
cold concrete tomb.

And now she lies calmly
in the coffin raised up,
my fingers fitting the gold band
onto her hard and cold hand.

Forever she sleeps in her bridal gown,
surrounded by satin in a virgin bed,
in the midnight graveyard,
with a minister of the dead
nodding and smiling
with the book in his hands,
our marriage complete before God,
before Devil,
as I recite after him;
"With this ring I thee wed!"

— Jason J. Marchi





STRANGER SUNS, Part 2

by George Zebrowski

art: Bob Eggleton



In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Earth's environmental problems dominate its politics. Inside the remains of a deteriorating orbital industrial park, Juan Obrion (a moody physicist who is disappointed with humankind) and his friend and colleague, Malachi Moede (a Kenyan educated in Britain) construct a tachyon detector, in the hope of breaking the radio silence of the universe. Their work, like much scientific research in these troubled times, is supported by the United Nations Earth Resources Security Organization; Juan fears that Titus Summet, the UNERS Director, may soon cancel his project.

At last Juan and Malachi bring their detector into operation. To their great surprise, they pick up a continuous tachyon signal from the Antarctic. Juan suspects that Titus Summet (a gruff administrator, who seems more interested in keeping the scientists under his authority producing practical results rather than letting them do the work they prefer) has neglected to tell him about another project — one for generating tachyons. Summet, however, is as surprised as the two men, and sends Juan and Malachi to Antarctica to investigate the mystery. They are joined there by Lena Dravic (a biologist developing practical techniques for extending the lives of politicians instead of the basic immunological research she would rather be doing) and Magnus Rassmussen (an older physicist who gave up science for administration and regrets the choice, and who works as a consultant to Summet and the UN-ERS).

The signal's source is discovered; excavation reveals a large installation in the ice-filled Antarctic valley. After triggering an extremely advanced lock system, which permits entrance to the installation, Juan, Malachi, Lena, and Magnus explore the structure along a downward spiraling passageway lined by hundreds of strange chambers. The four enter these rooms by triggering another version of the dissolving lock system, in which a solid barrier becomes a doorway, but are baffled by what they find. The installation could have been built only by an advanced civilization.

The four are investigating a vertical shaft when they are distracted by a shout in the passageway behind them. Malachi, startled by the sound, loses his balance and tumbles into the shaft, but seems to float down rather than fall. Titus Summet appears in the passageway accompanied by Ivan Dovzhenko (a UN-ERS signatory observer from the Soviet Union). The Russian immediately objects to the presence of an unofficial party inside the find, but Summet persuades Dovzhenko to permit the trio to look for Malachi before they leave. He leads the Russian away as Juan, Lena, and Magnus go down the spiral passageway in search of their comrade.

In the meantime, Malachi, who has landed at the bottom of the shaft safely, has made a few discoveries. He comes up the passageway, runs into the three searchers, and takes them to a drum-shaped chamber that displays what appear to be three-dimensional charts of G-type stars, and a room filled with non-human biped skeletons.

Tremors suddenly shake the floor. The four scientists hurry out to the lock, only to find it blocked with ice. The tremors become worse, subsiding intermittently. Hoping they will be dug out soon, Juan

and the others explore a few chambers. Magnus is trapped when one of the dissolving doorways solidifies around him, but Juan manages to trigger it and release him. The tremors become more severe; the four hurry back to the lock, hoping the rescue team has managed to dig through the ice.

Outside, the excavation team flees across trembling ice riven with cracks. As Titus Summet and others watch, the installation rises from the ice and reveals itself to be a large sphere, which disappears into the sky, taking Juan, Lena, Malachi, and Magnus with it.

Facing lack of water and starvation, the four trapped scientists desperately investigate other chambers along the downward spiral. They come to suspect that they are in a ship headed for an unknown destination, but Juan worries that they will not live long enough to find out much about the seemingly deserted alien vessel. They have with them only the packs of supplies they brought along when they first entered the ship.

Juan and his companions move their meager supplies into the drum-shaped chamber. Here, in the viewspace, the four observe red and blue shifts in the star fields, indications of great velocity, and other signs that suggest the ship is making interstellar jumps. Their food and water problems are solved when Magnus accidentally duplicates his hand in one of a bank of small cubicles in one of the chambers. This enables the group to duplicate its supplies endlessly and gives them a clue to the ship's technology: the dissolving doorways and the duplicator both work on a similar fluid control of matter.

After a number of jumps, the viewspace in the drum-shaped chamber shows that the ship is approaching a massive object in what appears to be an endless fog, as if the starship were feeling its way to port. A huge black globe appears and the ship enters it. The four leave the ship and explore this vast interior, careful not to go too far; they are startled to find that their fleeting thoughts create the appearance of three-dimensional illusions. The group gets back into the ship only moments before it leaves this otherspace *station.*

Juan and the others speculate that the ship draws its power from stars directly, and that these hyperspace suncore stations transmit energy to ships through short-space channels. The suns may be part of a vast web that makes interstellar travel possible. As time passes, Juan, Malachi, and Lena come to respect Magnus; Juan and Lena are drawn to each other, but keep their distance. Trapped as they are, aboard a ship they cannot control, they must get along and learn what they can, with only the faintest hope of finding a way home.

So far, the ship and its stations seem deserted. The scientists speculate that the ship itself may be a conscious entity. They are unaware that the ship's artificial intelligence has been trying to reach out to them, without much success. As the craft rushes into interstellar space and prepares for further jumps, Juan begins to feel that something is intruding into his mind. His pain worsens as he struggles against the invisible intruder, terrified that he is going insane.

11. The Beckoning Beyond

Lena knelt at his side. "Juan — what's wrong?"

The pain hunted through his brain, rifling hidden places. Magnus and Malachi stood at his feet, looking down at him as if from a great height.

"I don't know!" he shouted. "There's . . . too much of me!" Lena grabbed his shoulders as he sat up. He shook his head. "I'm becoming . . . someone else!" Her head seemed to float near him. "I've got to get up!" He pushed Lena away, and it seemed that her head would roll away from him across the floor. He staggered to his feet and scrambled up the incline as Magnus and Malachi reached for him.

"Juan!" Lena called to a stranger.

The oval portal glowed. He went through and ran up the winding passage, struggling with his limbs, terrified by their movement.

The memory of warm water calmed him. His mother smiled at him, and he felt the mystery of their separation, the growing loneliness of becoming himself. His legs slowed their furious pace. He stopped and faced a portal. It glowed and he went through —

— into a dark chamber.

Below him, star fields were a sprinkle of snow on black ground. He reached out with his right hand; its silhouette seemed alien to him.

The space around him went black. Longing and loss seized him, but he was suddenly surrounded by the fiery moths of fleeing, red-shifted galaxies.

The view flashed blue six times. The reddening edge of space pulled closer. One galaxy became a massive hot coal as he rushed toward it. Expectation filled him, as if he were going home.

Lena stood in the passage, aware that she had forgotten to do something. Juan came around the turn, and they slipped back through the glow. She felt as if she were sleepwalking as they went down the incline and joined the two others at the center of the pit.

The sky began to flash blue. A reddened galaxy grew to cover half the viewspace. Its center was blackened, like a burnt pot. Lena felt urgency, as if at any moment the stars would fade away, leaving the ship far beyond the bright spaces of the cosmic ballroom.

The intervals between jumps quickened, as if the ship were anxious to reach the crimson wheel. The red-shifted island universe brightened, flashing into more vivid colors as the ship overtook it. She felt relieved.

Magnus stood simultaneously on Earth and on the crystalline edge of the universe, trying to read the time on his watch by bursts of blue light. Dark shapes hurried across his brain; a throng of questions cried for the justice of answers. His lost ambitions grieved as he wondered at the precise symmetry of ignorance and knowledge; his son's face reproached him.

Suddenly, he was free of himself, washed clean by the river of alien light that flowed through him. Old mental graves were emptied. He sensed unvisited interiors within himself, waiting to be inhabited. The space of each ignorance would be filled exactly by the same amount of knowledge.

* * *

Malachi was at peace as the ship glided above the disk of the galaxy. Ancient halo stars hung below, dying cinders scattered on a plain where stars were still being born. Swirls of black dust laced the spiral of suns, draining into the hub. Globular clusters were bright buoys riding above the maelstrom, marking the titanic black hole that crouched inside the veiled center.

He had never been sure of who he was, and now it would be easy to discard everything he had adopted. Except for the friends he had made among scientists, engineers, and UN workers, his true identity seemed to be that of a professional stranger. Shapes danced under an African sky, but they did not know him either. A giant had placed him inside a soccer ball and kicked it across the cosmos. Soon he would become someone else.

The ship dipped into the galaxy, and the flashing stopped. A white dwarf appeared in the viewspace. Juan tensed, expecting the shift into otherspace.

The dwarf winked out with a blue flash, and the ship drifted toward the pulse of the suncore station.

"I was expecting to be told something," Magnus said, rubbing his forehead.

Lena drew a deep breath. "Something was very interested in us. Perhaps we didn't measure up."

Juan said, "I felt as if I were coming home."

"So did I," Malachi added.

"Old systems . . ." Magnus said, "trying to deal with us."

"We can't reach out to them," Lena said, "as if we're locked too tightly in our skulls."

It surprised Juan that he was not more upset. Something had probed at things he had hidden even from himself. He wondered if they were now recorded somewhere, waiting to be deciphered. Aliens might one day know more about him than he did. "If they come from stars like our own," he said, "we might learn to communicate with them, or with their systems, eventually."

Lena said, "A true *other* would be beyond us."

"Yes, yes," Malachi said impatiently, "yellow suns are the grass of the universe. Our builders seem to be oxygen breathers, and humanoid species might be able to break through to each other. But who or what were we in contact with, besides ourselves?"

"Maybe it was a first step," Juan heard himself say as the black globe of the station appeared in the gray space. The entrance opened like the door to a furnace, and the ship slipped inside.

As the amber glow returned to the drum-shaped chamber, Juan felt a nervous prompting in his limbs. "We'll take two packs and our gloves," he said as he stood up.

"Where are we going?" Lena asked.

She seemed a stranger as he looked at her. "I don't know." He hoisted his

pack and slipped it on. Malachi put on the other one.

"Are we all going?" Magnus asked.

"Follow me," Juan said.

When they came to the well in the passage, Juan stepped in and floated downward. He glanced up and saw the others descending after him. He was calm and uncaring as he fell faster. After a few moments he slowed, positioned his legs, and alighted on a catwalk. An exit oval glowed as he stepped toward it. He passed through —

— into a dark passage. Amber light glowed in the exit just ahead. He went through into a large chamber. A globe sat in its docking cradle. "In here!" he called to the others. They came out beside him and gazed at the hemisphere that towered some twenty-five meters into the vault.

"A small version of this ship," Malachi said.

Juan led the way through the open air lock. The passage curved right, leading them into a small drum-shaped, amber-lit chamber.

"Same kind of pit," Magnus said as they stepped into the center circle. The viewspace glowed as he and Lena sat down on the floor.

"We're moving," she said as Juan and Malachi dropped their packs next to her.

Juan looked up and saw the station disappear into the gray. A distant self tensed within him as he sat down on his pack. The view switched to normal space, revealing a nearby globular cluster as the ship oriented itself toward a white dwarf.

"It's very close in," Juan said as the red-brown disk of a planet became visible.

Lena clutched at her hair. "My head . . ."

Juan felt a rushing in his ears. Magnus was rubbing his temples. Malachi slumped forward.

"It's worse," Lena said, leaning back against one of the packs.

The brown planet grew until it filled the viewspace. Flashes of light shot across its dark surface. Pain ripped through Juan's forehead.

"We're falling," Lena murmured, raising her hand to push back the descending weight of the alien world.

Juan rushed upward through cold water and surfaced, gasping, then opened his eyes and saw Lena holding the canteen for him. He took a swallow and pushed it away.

"Pain gone?" she asked.

He nodded and looked past her to where Magnus and Malachi stood with drooping shoulders.

He sat up. "Have we landed?"

"Apparently," Magnus said tiredly.

Juan stood up, massaging his temples. Lena touched his shoulder. "Are

you all right?" she asked. He straightened up, still feeling dizzy.

"Let's go," he said, reaching for his pack, but Magnus picked it up.

"Mal and I will manage," the older man said.

Juan looked at his companions anxiously, then searched for signs of compulsion within himself. The urge to leave the shuttle was growing stronger. He hurried out into the passage and led the way to the lock.

"I feel a breeze," Lena said as she caught up with him.

Juan stopped. "The lock may be open." He took a cautious breath and went on.

The open lock revealed a rusty brown desert. The large, pale disk of the white dwarf hung low over the horizon, unable to blot out the stars with its feeble daylight.

"It's half the apparent size of our sun," Malachi said, "so we must be very close in."

A warm wind gusted into the lock. Juan took a step outside and felt the gritty soil under his boots. "That way." He pointed straight ahead. "Do you feel it?" he asked, facing his companions. They all nodded. He led them away from the shuttle, stopped, and looked back.

The small globe sat on a plain. Overhead, the globular cluster was a fragmented sun, adding little to the dwarf's light.

"Why are we here?" Lena demanded. "Who are they? What are they doing to us?"

A dust storm crept across the horizon like some black beast.

"Perhaps they're not persons," Magnus said, "but forms of artificial intelligences trying to reach out to us."

"Maybe this was a special place to them once," Lena said, looking around. "Let's go that way." She pointed away from the storm. Juan noticed that she seemed stockier in her pants and shirt. He brushed a few grains of sand from his face and followed her.

The odors of the desert were musky. Small plants with large red leaves and a faint glow around their roots dotted the ground; mushroom-like knobs clustered around the plants. He looked up as Lena neared a shallow rise. Malachi and Magnus came up to him.

"She seems to know where she's going," Magnus said, catching his breath. He gazed after her speculatively. "She likes you, Juan," he said as they continued after her.

Juan felt embarrassed. Magnus walked on as Juan and Malachi dropped back. "She's a good biologist," the Kenyan said.

Juan glanced at his friend.

Malachi said, "I'd heard about her before, and from what Magnus told me. She very much wanted to do immunology and genome detailing before Titus turned her into a brewer of elixirs for our leaders."

Juan nodded. "I wonder how many politicians Titus keeps on a leash with medical favors."

"I wouldn't offend her by asking. I don't expect your reserve with women to disappear overnight, but I think she's affected you."

"I hardly know her." In place of love he'd demanded both physical beauty and accomplishment, but he had yet to think of Lena in those terms.

They slowed their pace and Malachi said, "Magnus tells me she reminds him of someone he once knew."

Juan watched as she went over the top of the rise. Magnus reached it and motioned for them to hurry. They quickened their pace and came up beside him.

Below, a dozen or more domes stood on the sandy ground, in what seemed a random arrangement. The ones at the center were the largest. Lena slipped into the shadows between two of the structures.

"A tree!" she shouted, echoing from the domes.

They scrambled down and hurried between the first two domes. Juan saw a short, heavy trunk covered by a smooth white bark, standing alone in the open. Lena stooped under it and was partly hidden by the large, low-hanging branches. Patches of white light wandered across her face as a breeze turned the large red leaves. She seemed a stranger, examining him from cover.

Her eyes watched him warily as he stepped under the branches, as if he might be a threat. He noticed the green glow at the base of the trunk as he breathed in the sharp, acidic scent of the leaves.

"Red chlorophyll in the vegetation," she said, examining one of the round, irregularly bordered leaves. "I don't know," she whispered strangely, "but I can almost remember."

"What?" he asked, taking her by the shoulders.

"Don't you feel it?"

He almost knew, but the thought fled like a shy child.

"Juan!" she said in surprise. "They knew the universe when it was young, and they tried to unite it with their web. They couldn't have perished through disease or war, being able to do what they did."

Earth now lay in the past, he realized. Light from the home galaxy would be millions of years old here. The ship's jumps had taken them into Earth's future; they would return to the past — to this world's future — by again outrunning the light. For an instant he was appalled by the futility of common sense struggling doggedly within him to imagine, in defiance of relativistic reasoning, a simultaneous moment here and on Earth.

Lena took his hand, and they came out from under the tree as Malachi and Magnus caught up with them.

"Do you still feel compelled?" Magnus asked her.

"Nothing now," she replied, looking around at the domes. "We're probably the first in a long time to come and wonder what happened here."

Juan looked down at the grainy sand, then up at the stars, and imagined what might be entombed within the domes. Perhaps the builders had sim-

ply died, fulfilling a death wish common to all species. Clearly, there was little they could not have done. They might have changed themselves into beings who no longer needed the ships and the web, and that might have precipitated a fatal crisis of identity. Such fears existed on Earth, among those who saw the end of human form through the wedding of bio-engineering and nano-tech.

"What now?" Malachi asked.

Juan walked toward the nearest dome. "There's a portal."

"Do you feel we have to enter?" Magnus asked.

"No, not particularly."

He turned to Lena. "How about you?"

"No, it's gone now," she said.

"Perhaps they no longer have to push us," Malachi said. "Our own curiosity can be trusted."

Juan came up to the portal in the dome. It glowed and he passed —

12. Supercivilizations

— into a yellow-lit space.

The others came in behind him. Juan's eyes adjusted, and he went forward across the smooth ebony surface, feeling as if he were late for something.

"Why are we here?" Lena asked.

Malachi laughed. "Maybe the program has gone idiotic, but is still trying to direct us."

Juan felt a twinge of pain in his head, but it faded. They stopped as the dome darkened. The black mirror of the floor became transparent, revealing the swirl of a galaxy. The view pulled in to a dense region near the center. A bright sun grew larger. Suddenly, they were rushing past a pearl-string of worlds. One ring of habitats after another appeared, enclosing the star in a shell of life. Time was passing, Juan realized, as other stars appeared, surrounded by countless habitats created from the raw materials of natural worlds. Double and triple suns were enclosed. The view pulled back to show a spiral arm crisscrossed by red lines.

"There's your power web," Magnus said.

Red beams reached from the spiral arm, striking deep into other quadrants, penetrating the galactic center, thrusting out to the globular clusters. The view pulled back to reveal a grouping of galaxies; red lines lanced out and joined them.

The view pulled back again, encompassing a dozen clusters of galaxies. Red lines winked into place, reminding Juan of a stained-glass window in black and red.

"How proud they must have been," Lena said, "to have linked so many

worlds."

"And where are they?" Juan answered, wondering what his own kind might do with such a vast artifact.

"Maybe they grew old," Magnus said as the dome filled with light again, "longer-lived, but with fewer individuals. Time might have winnowed out those who could sustain an interest in living, leaving the rest to pass away. The web became a useless possession in the face of greater things."

"What greater things?" Lena asked.

Magnus shrugged, looking very tired. "They might have gone forward in time, the few of them who were left, circling black holes to slow their bioclocks. They might have left our universe entirely. Or they might still be here, living small lives on backward-seeming planets, perhaps finding satisfaction in guiding young civilizations. It's possible that our Earth is descended from their vast culture."

"You've been thinking about this," Lena said.

"The web suggests so much," Magnus continued, sounding awed. "I have the constant feeling that I'm failing to make obvious deductions from what we've seen."

"Are any of us up to it?" Juan asked. Here was the older man's chance, he thought, to make up for the work he'd never done.

"Something wants us to learn," Lena said. "Maybe we're being shown this so we can choose a destination.

"We've got to keep trying," Magnus said, "at least until we know enough to get home."

Juan looked into his eyes and felt the stir of new courage. Then he heard a soft whisper at the limit of his hearing.

"What's wrong?" Lena asked.

"I hear something . . . listen!"

They all stared at him as a storm of voices broke within him, babbling from some distant place. He felt panic.

Lena touched his arm. "Are you in pain?"

"No," he answered, steadied by the sudden hope that at any moment he would be able to understand what the voices were saying.

The dwarf was nearer the horizon when they came outside. Sand blew in from the desert, rustling the tree. A swarm of insects rose from the branches and became motes of dust against the large white sun. The whispers in Juan's head were muted by the rising wind.

"Insects are probably the oldest surviving life here," Lena said. "They adapt to anything — even radiation and lack of free oxygen. No need to be intelligent, only prolific."

Magnus said, "I've always thought of instinct as a kind of automatic reason, with survival its object."

The sun touched the brown horizon, reddening the land. For a moment

the star seemed to hesitate, a ball on a dusty table, threatening to roll toward them, but the serrated horizon stopped it. The sky darkened, brightening the globular cluster. The wind quickened, growing colder.

"Lena," Juan said loudly. "I still hear it . . . something gathering in the air around us."

She looked at him suddenly, eyes wide. "I hear it now!" Malachi and Magnus were listening.

Time's flow seemed to quicken with the wind.

"Look!" Malachi shouted, pointing toward a growing darkness between the domes. Static flashed within the black cloud of dust. Wind whipped Juan's face. Shadows raced. Roach-like insects fled around his feet.

He was alone in the storm as the whispers became louder, demanding, insisting, rushing through him as if he were a ghost, rifling his brain, ripping out personal memories at random and holding them up to bleed.

". . . your mother works hard, so you could at least do something practical . . ."

". . . what makes you think you'll be any good?"

". . . it's been a waste . . ."

". . . you think you're any better than the rest of us?"

". . . I don't care what happens to them, I've got my own problems . . ."

". . . what is this *me* I'm stuck with?"

". . . I'd cut his throat if I could get away with it . . ."

". . . feelings . . . the universe wound me up to have them, so I would fit into an evolutionary niche . . ."

". . . I hate him, he's so full of himself, the jerk . . ."

". . . you, a genius? You're just like the rest of us . . ."

". . . all these years you've told me how stupid you are, I believe it now . . ."

". . . a friend? You're stupid and blind, your mind is a mill of free associations and self-serving impulses. Friendship has to end somewhere . . ."

". . . you're never there for me — I'm just someone to push aside when it's convenient . . ."

". . . I do love you, but I can't live hoping you might return the favor . . ."

". . . reality is a tyranny to be defeated . . ."

". . . we no longer tell each other the truth . . ."

". . . I'm tired of this dance . . ."

Sand struck his face. He turned away from the wind. Pain compressed his eyes; his neck became rigid. He fell to the ground. The wind howled as the whispers grew louder.

". . . poor deluded fool . . ."

". . . the alien, what secrets! Death will not be there if I can open a window into their minds!"

The ground tilted under him. He dug his fingers into the sandy red clay as his spine became a molten rod distributing pain into his chest, shoulders,

and arms. Insects crawled around him; for a moment he imagined them spreading to all the worlds of the web, while his skeleton remained here. A smudge of red shift on an astronomical plate would mark his grave.

A tinkling sounded in his ears. Somewhere, a mad harpsichordist was playing a dance tune. He remembered the alien shuttle's open lock and feared that the insects would infest the craft. He tried to see through the dust, enough to crawl back to the dome, but he couldn't even see the ground. He hid his face in his arms and waited.

The whispers grew fainter as the pain retreated from his body. Resolve flooded into him, and he knew that he had not crossed the universe to die here. The whispers huddled at the edges of his awareness.

"Juan," Lena said, grasping his arm.

He pulled her close against him. "Where are the others?"

"I don't know."

The howl dropped to a whistle as the storm passed. He rolled on his back and saw icy stars. Lena sat up next to him. "Were you in pain?" she asked.

"My thoughts were being looted."

"Mine also."

He lay there, gazing up at her, trying to recover from the emotional assault, wondering if the alien presence had understood the information it had stolen from him. Lena was struggling to regain her composure. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded and looked around. "I don't see the others." The storm was past the domes, rushing out into the desert. Lena shivered. "It's getting colder."

He got to his feet and helped her up. The white dwarf had set, leaving only the pale light of cluster and stars. "Malachi!" Lena shouted, pointing at a dark shape moving toward them.

"Are you okay?" Juan asked.

Malachi nodded and tapped his temple with a forefinger. "Except up here. Made me wander away in the storm."

"Same with us," Juan said.

"Where's Magnus?" Lena asked. They all looked around. "Magnus!" she shouted.

Cold wind gusted toward them as Juan looked toward the tree and saw that something lay under it. They rushed over and scrambled under the low branches. Lena knelt down by the older man and felt his pulse. Juan squatted next to her as Malachi crawled around to the other side.

"Nothing," her shadowed face whispered.

"No," Juan said.

"Work on him!" Malachi shouted.

She bent over, positioning his mouth, then pulled back. "It's too late," she said, clenching her hands into a fist.

"Try!" Juan shouted.

She bent down and breathed into Magnus. Hope raced through Juan as she worked. He seized the man's wrist and felt for a pulse.

Finally, she sat up and took a deep breath. "Heart, probably. No equipment to save him. I think he went quickly."

Juan felt tears in his eyes, and shivered. "The stress of their probing killed him!"

Lena shuddered from the cold and said, "It might have happened, anyway." Juan noticed their billowing breath.

"It may get very cold," Malachi said. "We must get back."

Juan felt dismay as he realized that there was no way to preserve the body.

"We'll have to bury him here," Lena said.

Juan swallowed hard and said, "He was just beginning to live again, to be interested . . ." His voice broke. "He was thinking all the time."

Malachi dropped his pack and took out a spade.

"Where's his pack?" Lena asked, looking around.

"Behind me," Malachi said, "where he dropped it." He started to dig.

The cold wind soughed through the branches. Lena bent down to see if Magnus's eyes were closed, covered his face with a cloth, and then set his arms together.

"Was he religious?" Juan asked.

"I don't think so," she said. "I don't really know." She emptied his pockets. "We'll need the pen. I think he was writing in the notebook."

Juan worked his way around to Malachi and took over the digging.

"I'll get the other spade," the Kenyan said.

As he dug by the body, Juan was startled by his own existence in a way he had not known since boyhood — by the sudden sense of being apart from the landscape, by the realization that he might just as easily not have existed, and that one day he would be nothing, and that his future nothingness would last forever. . . .

The red sandy clay was soft, making digging easy. Juan took turns with Malachi as Lena held the flashlight. When the grave was deep enough, they lowered the body in, their hands trembling from the growing cold.

Juan looked at Lena, then at Malachi as they knelt under the low branches, wishing that Magnus might have perished through some mistake of his own making, and not by chance. "Magnus," Juan said, "we'll do it for you — everything you might have wanted to learn. We'll try to understand as you would have."

They took turns filling the grave.

13. The Survivors

Bright auroras played on the horizon as they marched back to the shuttle. Juan shifted Magnus's pack to a more comfortable position and followed

Lena and Malachi up the rise. The loss of Magnus seemed impossible. He wanted to retreat to the big ship, get some rest, and read Magnus's notebook.

"I don't see the shuttle," Lena called back from the top of the rise.

"We should see it clearly," Malachi answered, "even though it's darker."

Juan reached the top and peered across the empty desert. "It probably returned to the suncore."

"Did they mean to strand us here?" Malachi asked.

"Temperature's still dropping," Lena said, pointing to her billowing breath.

"We're back where we started," Juan said, "cut off from food and water."

Malachi moved his arms to keep warm. "We're not dressed for this."

Juan said, "We'll rest first, then start exploring." He glanced at where the shuttle should have been. "Maybe it'll return. We'll check back."

It was warm inside the dome. They sat on the black floor, basking in the golden light as they ate.

"Lena," Juan said, "do you think the mental intrusions we experienced could have brought on a stroke or heart attack?"

"We can't know," she answered.

"She's right, old friend," Malachi said. "We can't guess their intentions toward us, and we don't know what Magnus's health was like."

Juan sipped a cup of water. "But Titus wouldn't have assigned him if his health was bad."

Malachi shook his head. "It was a quick assignment, remember. And there are ways of hiding things." He lay down and put his head on the pack. Lena curled up on one of the two bedrolls and closed her eyes. Juan sat back against the other pack, took out Magnus's notebook, and turned to the entries.

March 29, 2022. The ship reminds me of an empty rail car. All this space seems to have been for carrying large numbers of passengers, or cargo. What were they doing? And where are they? What's left of them seems no stronger than the voice of conscience, or even a good migraine. If they're trying to communicate, we don't seem to be good subjects for their method.

March 30, 2022. Some basic change in their outlook might account for their abandonment of the web. Maybe there was some physical problem with its use?

The entries ended. Magnus had not had time. Juan felt his loss even more keenly as he turned the blank pages.

Lena shook him awake gently, but sleep seemed worth any price, even if the very atmosphere were freezing solid outside; the dome would stand, the warm light would glow.

"Juan, we've got to go," she said softly.

He opened his eyes and sat up.



"All ready?" Malachi asked.

Juan nodded, then rolled up his pack. Lena helped him put it on. "Ready," he said.

They approached the exit portal. Malachi went through first, then Lena. It was still cold and dark when he emerged. His eyes watered from the wind.

"Where can we go?" Lena asked. "What can we hope to find?"

"Maybe one of these domes has a duplicator," Malachi said.

"Let's see if the shuttle might have come back," Lena added.

"We'll split up," Malachi said. "Time is everything now. You two start with the domes. I'll check the shuttles. We'll meet back here in thirty minutes, or sooner, no matter what. Cheers." He walked away toward the rise.

The wind swayed the alien tree as Juan and Lena crossed to the other domes. "I'll take the one to the left," he said. "You take the right."

She nodded and hurried away. He waited a moment, trying to think as simply as he could about the alien technology, concentrating on its style — which was that of a self-servicing biological organism, with never a knob, lever, or button to push.

Across the way, Lena confronted the entrance to a dome. He hurried over. "It won't work," she said, stepping aside.

He presented himself. Again, the entrance failed to glow. "Let's try mine," he said.

They went back and he approached the oval indentation. "Some of these may be inactive," he said when there was no glow.

"I'll try the next one," Lena said, hurrying away. He watched as she approached the dome. The glow failed to appear. She came back, beating her arms to keep warm.

"Here's Mal," Juan said.

"No shuttle, I'm afraid," the Kenyan said. "What have you two found?"

"We can't enter these three," Lena answered.

"Let's go back to the first one," Juan said. "Might as well be warm while we decide what to do next."

"My nose is freezing," Malachi said.

They hurried back. Malachi stepped toward the oval. "Bloody strange," he said when it failed. Juan went up to it and felt the indentation with his gloved hands, hoping to trigger it as he had done with the one in the ship.

Lena said, "We'll freeze out here. No telling how long the night will last."

Malachi came up to Juan. "No luck? Take out my binoculars, will you?" He turned around. Juan unzipped a lower pocket and handed them to him. "I glimpsed something from the rise when I was coming back. Let's take a better look."

They followed him to the top of the rise. Malachi put the glasses up to his eyes and scanned the horizon beyond the domes.

"What is it?" Juan asked.

"Can't see much. Oh, hello — there it is."

"What?"

"Look for yourself."

Juan took the binoculars. A dark shape appeared in the digital view.

"I don't think it's a natural part of the landscape," Malachi said. "Push the infrared."

Juan touched the mode control and the desert glowed, wrapped in a white haze of radiating heat. The huge mound glowed even more brightly, like something trapped in the sand.

"There's a lot of heat there," Juan said, passing the glasses to Lena.

"Exactly," Malachi replied. "These domes are not the whole show."

Lena peered through the binoculars. "What do you think it could be?"

"Another installation of some kind."

"We'll go see," Juan said.

Malachi nodded. "What have we to lose?"

They tried a dozen domes on their way to the far side of the grouping, without success. Wind lashed them when they came out into the open, throwing sand and clay into their faces. Uprooted plants flew past them. A black tumbleweed-like ball ten meters high rolled toward them across the green glowing desert. Juan stepped out of the way, but it grazed his arm with a dry crackle.

He marched slowly, his gaze fixed on Lena and Malachi ahead. "Don't stop!" Malachi shouted to him when he paused to look back at the domes.

Juan shifted his pack and marched. The gusting wind was a boxer, delivering a variety of blows to his face. His eyes watered from the cold, dusty air, and his nose stung from the pungent odors, but he was getting used to the ache in his muscles.

Slowly, the black mound grew larger, camouflaging the figures of Lena and Malachi. Juan quickened his pace and caught up with Lena.

"It doesn't seem much farther," she said, taking his arm. They moved against the wind together.

"We're here!" Malachi shouted suddenly.

Juan peered ahead at his motionless figure, but the mound seemed no closer.

"It starts here," Malachi said as they came up to him. He set his boot on the surface. The dark structure rose gently away from them toward a distant height.

"What is it?" Lena asked.

"Underground installation of some kind."

"Not another ship?"

Malachi shook his head. "It would have to be huge, judging by this flat curvature."

"You want to cross it," Juan said.

"Either that or go back and try more domes."

Juan nodded. "We have little choice." Sorrowfully, he tried to imagine what Magnus would have thought. Was it linked to the domes as part of some project? He started up the slope, boots catching on the ribbed surface. Lena came up on his right, Malachi on his left, and linked arms with him. The cluster stars merged as he looked up through teary eyes.

"It's colder," Lena said as they made their way upward in the rising wind. The sloping surface began to seem like a treadmill after a while. The green glowing desert was sullen with shadows as the aurora danced on the horizon.

The wind died away.

"That's a relief," Lena said. "Let's rest."

They sat down and braced their feet on the ridges. Juan breathed deeply and leaned back against his pack. After a moment, he reached down and rapped his knuckles on the alien surface. "Seems like the same stuff the ship is made of. Mal, what are we looking for?"

"An entrance, perhaps. There's something here, and I don't think it's a ship."

They were silent for a few moments. "You were beginning to feel closer to Magnus, weren't you?" Lena asked.

Juan nodded. "Sticking his hand in that cubbyhole saved our lives. I think he had a way of looking at things. The ship, of course, but I felt that he was also looking into me."

"He told me," Lena said, "that he considered himself a failure."

"I guess I thought that at first."

"He was a father-figure to me," Lena murmured, leaning forward and hugging her knees, "even though I only saw him once or twice a year."

Juan glanced at her. "My father died of a stroke, while taking a leak, on the day I got my first research job. I called home and found out."

"Magnus did his best," Malachi said, "right up to the end. He would have been a special friend to us."

"We'll have to get back," Juan said, trying to sound decisive, "to make something of all this." The words seemed hopeless, but he felt as if they were expected of him. He closed his eyes and imagined the roots of the alien tree piercing Magnus's heart and brain, slowly reviving the body, and shuddered from unexpressed grief.

A moment passed and Juan awoke. Lena stirred against him. The dwarf was a bonfire on the horizon, lighting up the desert like a dim bulb in a dusty closet. Juan felt stiff but refreshed.

Lena sat up and checked her watch. "Eleven hours."

"We were exhausted," Malachi said, standing up. "Fortunately, the wind died away and the temperature went up. It may get hot. We should go."

Lena drank some water, then handed the canteen to Juan. He gulped some down and gave it to Malachi.

"Anyone hungry?" she asked as Juan got to his feet.

"I'm not," he said, helping her up.

"No — let's be off," Malachi added.

They went forward three abreast. After a few minutes, Juan said, "We might just march across and down to the desert again."

"It seems to be leveling off," Malachi replied. "I think we're near the center."

They came to the edge of a large bowl in the surface. "Must be fifty meters across," Juan said.

"There's an opening in the center!" Malachi shouted, pointing. "And ribs by which we can descend."

"What is it?" Lena asked.

"Perhaps it's a vent," Malachi said, "or an entrance of some kind. I'll go first."

He started down slowly. Juan waited a few moments, then started after him. He looked up when he was a few meters down. Lena was starting her descent.

Malachi reached the bottom of the bowl and approached the opening at the center. He was kneeling and peering down when Juan reached him.

"The ridges run down the side," he said as Lena joined them. "We have to keep going while our water lasts."

"He's right," she said.

Malachi climbed down into darkness. Juan glanced at Lena. She gave him a sad look and followed. Juan waited, then sat down and found the ridges with his feet. He turned around and stood up on the first rung as the white dwarf crept up over the edge of the bowl. The sky had taken on a greenish blue hue, reminding him of construction paper he had played with as a boy.

"Everyone okay?" Malachi shouted from below.

"Yes," Lena called out.

"On my way," Juan answered, probing for the next step.

"I'll shine a light as soon as I reach bottom!" Malachi added.

Juan descended a dozen rungs and stopped to look down into the darkness.

"Bottom!" Malachi cried. "Hold still."

A beam of light stabbed up through the shaft. Juan glimpsed Lena making her way from rung to rung. He looked up, and for an instant thought he might see Magnus above him.

"I'm down!" Lena cried.

He hurried after her and jumped the last rung. Malachi was examining the chamber with his torch. The beam stopped on an exit. "Follow me," he said.

Lena went after him. Juan brought up the rear. They came out into a large white glowing dome. Malachi turned off his light.

"There seems to be no way out," Malachi said.

"Circle the edge," Juan replied.

They made their way around. Malachi stopped. "Here's an oval indentation." He stepped forward and the portal glowed. He stepped back and turned to Juan. "Shall we risk it?"

Juan looked at Lena. She nodded. "We've come this far."

Malachi took a deep breath. "So be it." He triggered the glow and disappeared.

"Come on," Juan said to Lena, taking her hand.

They stepped through —

— into a dark space.

His eyes adjusted, and he saw Malachi on the other side of the dimly lit oval chamber, standing before a large square frame of some kind.

"It looks like a window into nowhere," he said as they came up beside him. He stepped closer and peered in. "What do you think, Juan?" He flashed his light into the blackness. The beam disappeared.

"It's another kind of exit," Lena said. "Toss something through."

Juan took out a pack of chewing gum, removed one stick, and threw it in. The foil glittered in Malachi's beam and disappeared in mid-parabola.

"It's a way into someplace," Malachi said. "Where else can we go?" He stepped into the frame and vanished before Juan or Lena could reply.

Juan and Lena waited in the darkened chamber. She took his hand again as they stared into the frame. "He's been gone too long," she said after a while.

A light appeared and Malachi stepped out.

"What's there?" Juan asked.

"You'll see. Follow me." He turned and stepped through again.

Juan and Lena walked through —

— into a lighted space. Malachi was grinning at them; Juan saw the shuttle sitting in its dock.

"We're back in the suncore," Malachi said, "in our ship's shuttle bay."

"The bowl in the desert!" Lena exclaimed. "It's a dock for the shuttle."

"More than that," Malachi said. "Our ship's shuttle connects with a transmat installation on the planet below."

"But why have both?" she asked.

Juan understood. "The transmat frame came later, but even such an advanced system needs ships to set up terminals."

Lena looked puzzled. "But why didn't the shuttle leave us off at the bowl instead of the desert?"

"Good question," Malachi answered.

"Something may have wanted us to get lost and find our way back," he said bitterly, thinking of Magnus. He turned around and looked into the black frame. "We didn't notice it when we were here before."

"It's almost like coming home," Lena said. "We won't have to worry where our next meal is coming from."

Malachi said, "This may not be the only such frame."

"Do you think it's a matter transmitter?" Juan asked, staring into the blackness.

"It could be a direct bridge," Malachi replied, "or a transmission of our patterns across some form of short-space, in which case we're destroyed and recreated every time we pass through. No way to tell."

"But if there are other transmat frames," Lena said, "then there may be a way home." She looked fearful for a moment. "Can we be sure this is our ship?"

"We'll know," Juan said, "if we find our other packs where we left them."

14. Transmat

Juan said, "I don't think we can go back up the drop tube."

"There's got to be another exit," Lena said, looking around the bay. "There it is." She pointed to an exit indentation to the right of the shuttle.

Juan approached. It glowed and he went through —

— into the ship's winding passage. Lena and Malachi came out behind him.

"We're somewhere below the drop tube," Juan said, "and probably below our drum-shaped chamber." At his right, the passage seemed to descend even farther. He started upward, with Lena and Malachi at his left. "We're lucky the big ship didn't leave the station."

Lena said, "I have the feeling that this is the end of the line for it."

After washing and eating, they retreated from the cafeteria to the pit. They found the other two packs where they had left them, and settled down to sleep, feeling safe in the amber glow.

"The web is a vast maze," Malachi was saying as Juan awoke. "The short-space arteries through which power courses to the ships can be used to channel travelers directly. It's more elegant."

"So the web was becoming obsolete," Lena said, "and the black frame we used was the next development."

"Precisely — the ships were used to set up the bridges, if that's what they are, and to reach local points. Of course, ships would continue to draw power from web stars and be used to service transmat frames at distant points, if they failed. What we have here are two kinds of interstellar transport systems. The ship system was replaced, which was inevitable once hyperspace was entered to place core accumulators inside suns. The final step was implicit — send passengers directly through short-space, as with power transmission."

"Good morning," Lena said as Juan raised his head. She was sitting cross-legged on her sleeping bag. Malachi lay on his side, propping himself up on

one elbow.

Juan asked, "How far do you think they got?"

Malachi gestured with his free hand. "To begin with, it seems they would have installed bridge frames at all terminals."

"That would include ships," Lena said. "If a starship carried a frame bridge, then it would be linked to core stations, and through them to countless worlds."

Malachi sat up. "Exactly — which means all the worlds of the starcrossers are open to us."

"We know only one set of linked frames," Juan said, "but there may be a frame on Earth, or at least in our solar system. Somewhere in this core station or on that planet there may be a bridge frame leading to another station or stations that connect with Earth. We found this ship there, so perhaps it came to Earth for that purpose."

Lena stood up suddenly. "There may be a frame for Earth somewhere in the ship!"

"Yes, I see," Malachi said, "and very possibly there's a core station in our Sun."

"If they finished the job," Juan answered, sitting up.

"Consider this, old fellow," Malachi continued. "The ships went in pairs to do the job, like chaps who string wire, or some such thing. One vessel would have a transmat bridge on board, just to check out the new connecting frame after it's been installed. Construction crews could then pass quickly between ships when they were out on the job, even if the ships were at different points on the same planet or at the other end of a solar system. Each ship would also have an interstellar bridge frame linked to core stations, as we've seen, and the core stations themselves would be joined."

"Then there may very well be a second ship on Earth," Juan said, "connected with this one."

"We'll find the frame," Lena said excitedly.

"It could be anywhere," Malachi said, "in the chambers along the passage above us, or below us."

"Just imagine," Lena continued. "I might leave Earth by one frame, emerge on one of the web worlds, and find a link with this station by looking it up in some sort of directory."

Juan stood up and stretched. "I wonder if the frames are preset, or if they can be adjusted."

"We never see any controls," Malachi answered.

"It's possible," Juan said, "that the frames open into core stations only, or into inconveniently placed ships. Maybe they never finished the system."

"We'll worry about that later," Lena replied. "Where do we start our search? From the outer lock, or from here on down to the end of the passage? Shall we stick together or split up?"

"Are we in a rush?" Malachi asked.

"I have an idea," Juan said. "Let's follow the passage to its end, which should be somewhere below the exit to the shuttle bay."

"What do you expect to find there?" Malachi asked.

"Maybe nothing, but that's where the shuttle bay is. A bridge frame counts as a major transport facility, and we found a frame in the bay, so maybe there are others nearby."

Malachi smiled. "It's worth a try, despite the bad reasoning."

"If we find nothing," Juan said, "then we'll have no choice but to start on the chambers at the bottom and work up to the lock."

Beyond the exit to the shuttle bay, the passage suddenly ran straight. They hurried forward. It turned left and ended with an oval at least ten times larger than any they had seen in the ship.

"Shall we go in?" Malachi asked.

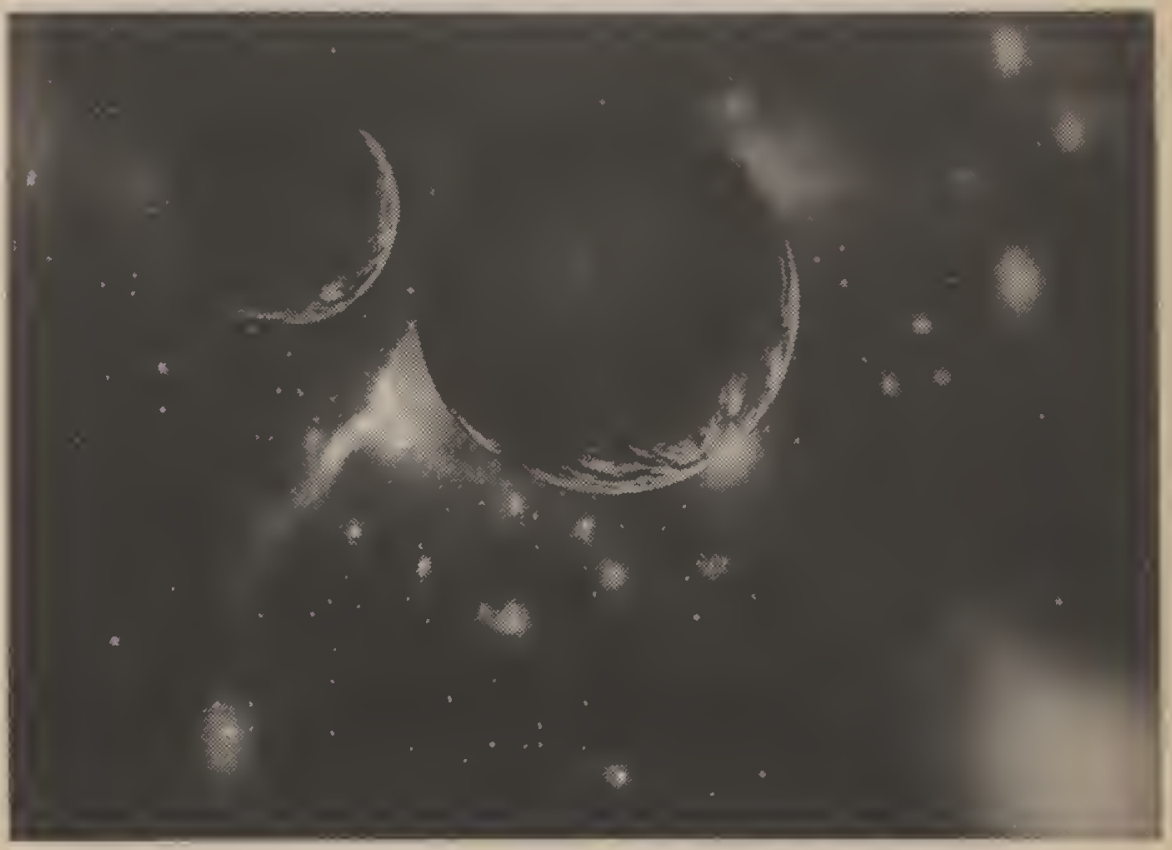
"We have no choice," Juan answered, glancing at Lena.

They stepped forward together —

— and passed into darkness.

Juan turned on his light and cast the beam from left to right. Six black frames gaped at them from the perimeter of the chamber, mirror-like but reflecting nothing. Each frame in the round chamber was large enough to admit a truck.

"We'll have to try them all," Lena said, "each of us separately. If one of us



doesn't come back, the other two will be warned."

"Either we hang separately or together," Malachi said.

"There's no way to judge danger," Lena added, "but we shouldn't risk three lives to reconnoiter. I don't expect anything will happen, based on what we've seen, but we should be cautious."

"I'll go first," Malachi said, turning on his torch. He went to the first frame from the left.

As he stepped through, his figure seemed to flatten, and he slipped into the blackness like a sheet of paper. Lena took a deep breath; Juan tensed as they waited.

Malachi emerged from the frame. "It's a dark passage," he said, "and branches about a hundred meters in. I felt my weight drop significantly. No point in exploring now, until we know something about the others."

"I'll try the next one," Juan said.

Lena brushed his arm as he moved away. "Be careful."

He faced the blackness and stepped through. Warm, stale air entered his lungs, but he was able to breathe it. He cast his beam in a circle and saw that the chamber was identical to the one he had just left.

He turned and staggered back through the second frame. Lena and Malachi grabbed his shoulders as he came out.

"I'm all right. Just a little dizzy. The air's warm in there."

They released him. "What was it?" Lena asked.

"Same as this, including six frames."

"It could be another ship," Malachi said. "And it might be somewhere on Earth. You might have gone home and not known it."

We deserve some mercy, Juan thought. One life was payment enough. He hated the snake of superstition slipping through him. It was not a matter of payments. Earth might be there, like walking from one room to another, and it would be a matter of chance that they had found it, nothing more. He felt guilty and said, "It doesn't seem right to abolish distance so easily."

"Easily?" Malachi asked. "Countless suns provide the energy to pry open space-time in this way. Dearly bought, I'd say, with a million years of bloody evolution behind the species that did it, not to mention centuries of scientific and engineering work."

"I don't know," Juan said. "Something happened, we know that . . ." He felt dizzy again, and Malachi caught him. "I can stand," he said after a moment.

"You were saying?" Malachi asked.

"Just suspicions."

"We should get our gear," Lena said, "before exploring farther."

"She's right," Malachi added. "Better to have our packs handy now."

"We'll get them," Juan said, feeling as if he were about to lose everything. "There's no rush."

* * *

Juan put on his pack and looked around in the amber glow of the pit, feeling that chance was poised to rob them of their new hope.

"We'll leave Magnus's kit," Malachi said. "It may serve if we ever come back."

"Ready?" Lena asked.

Juan felt a pang of sorrow as he looked at the pack on the floor. "Let's go," he said bitterly, then hurried up the incline and slipped through the glow. Lena and Malachi came out behind him. We may be going home, he told himself as he led the way down the passage — to a choking, barking, hate-filled world that doesn't deserve to have new doors opened for it.

15. Star Web

They stood before the frames. Juan imagined a maze of black snakes weaving in and out of a million suns. Ghostly material flowed through, reassembling into solidity at ports of call, draining suns to break the tyranny of space-time.

"Perhaps we should try the other four," Lena said.

"We'll do that later, if this one doesn't work out," Juan replied. "This one may connect with another ship, and that ship could be somewhere near home."

"But you didn't leave the chamber," Malachi objected, "so it may be anywhere."

"It was identical to this one. That can't be a coincidence. We can find out quickly enough."

He cast his beam into the second frame. They went through together. Juan breathed in slowly as they emerged. Turning around, he swept the frames with his torch. "Six frames."

Malachi turned toward the exit. "This will tell the story. Come on."

The oval glowed and they passed through —

— into a dark passage. Juan took a deep breath of cooler air.

"It's the identical straight section," Malachi said. "We're in another ship, but where?"

"My weight feels unchanged," Lena said.

"That may not mean anything, since there hasn't been much of a gravitational variation since we left Earth. The only time it dropped noticeably was when I went through frame one back there."

"How much of a drop was it?" Juan asked.

"It reminded me of my Lunar visit years ago."

Juan looked at his friend. "I know what you're thinking, but it's not much to go on."

"Quite right, but consider. It appears that the ships were probably used as frame terminals, initially at least. They could be left anywhere they went.

Perhaps that's why they're so roomy. They were intended to be moved into place, to hold supplies and equipment, as well as providing living quarters. More than one might have been left in our solar system."

Juan nodded. "So we may be home, or at least somewhere in our solar system, and the first frame may open on the Moon."

"And one of the others may open inside the Sun, or in various places within our sunspace or in nearby solar systems. We know that at least two ships are linked — the one we left and this one. That's the most important clue. Pretty shaky conjecture, I'll grant you, but it makes some sense."

"We'll soon know," Lena said as they started up the straight passage.

"It's exactly the same," Malachi said as they turned right.

They went up the winding passage, following their torch beams. "I wonder why the overheads are off," Lena said. "The frame and chamber exit worked."

"If we're not on Earth, or a world with a breathable atmosphere," Malachi said, "then the outer lock might not open."

"Unless something's gone wrong," Juan replied.

"It might not open at all," Lena said, "wherever we are."

"The ship may be buried very deeply," Malachi added, "if past experience is any indication."

They came to the drop tube. "It doesn't seem operational," Juan said, shining his light down into it.

"A bad sign," Malachi said. "If we're not home, we may have to go back through the frame just to eat."

Lena turned her head suddenly. "Listen."

Juan strained to hear, then looked back and saw brightness near the curve of the passage behind them. A luminous thing seemed to be following them.

It made the turn, and they saw the overhead lights coming on, square by square, racing their reflections in the shining black floor.

Malachi took a deep breath as the overheads rushed past them and around the next turn. "And ventilation, too!"

"We'd better hurry," Juan said. "The ship might be getting ready to leave."

"Just our luck!" Lena said as they hurried up the passage.

"It's possible," Malachi added. "Even likely."

Juan glanced at Lena as they jogged ahead. She returned a strained smile, and he wondered what ordinary days with her would be like.

The inner lock glowed as they approached. They went through and it closed behind them. Juan stepped forward. The circle dissolved to reveal a wall of dirt.

"We're buried," Lena said as he stepped back and the lock closed.

They dropped their packs. Malachi snapped open his spade and stepped toward the lock. It dissolved and he stabbed at the dirt. "It's soft!" he cried with relief. Juan got his own spade, came up beside him, and they began to

dig.

"I'll take over when one of you gets tired," Lena said, sitting down on her pack.

They were digging their way out of a starship somewhere, Juan thought as he looked at the growing pile of dirt on the floor. Magnus would have been vastly amused.

"Maybe you should try digging upward," Lena said after a while.

"Good idea," Malachi replied. "We intend to do so."

She got up and bent over the pile of dirt. "Look at this," she said.

Juan glanced at her hand and continued digging. "What is it?"

"Reminds me of a *Veado* bone from a small Brazilian deer."

Juan stopped digging. "Are you sure?"

She examined the bone more carefully, then knelt by the pile and sifted through the dirt. "Here's a few more. It's an extinct species, but I'm not enough of a paleobiologist to be sure."

Juan resumed digging. "We may be home!"

"More likely it's just something that only looks familiar." She got up. "Give me that spatula."

He put it in her hands and retreated to his pack. "We may be down very deep."

"How deep can we be?" Lena asked.

"Hundreds of meters," Juan replied, "up or straight ahead. No way to tell."

"Wonderful," she said with a grunt, attacking the wall of dirt.

"It may take days," Malachi added.

Juan paused, breathing heavily. "No choice. We have to find out where we are. Slant upward at forty-five degrees. Digging straight up is harder, and we may have a problem climbing our chimney. We can crawl up more easily at an angle."

"It may be a longer dig," she replied, pausing to catch her breath.

"She's right," Juan said as he got up and reclaimed his spade.

They dug in silence for a while. Two meters in, Juan began to angle upward.

"Ah, despair!" Malachi exclaimed. "It makes one so hungry."

They sat on their packs around one of the table-like structures in the alien cafeteria, eating duplicated fish and vegetables with rice. Juan was quiet, content to listen.

"I suspect," Malachi said, "that these doorways are a safety feature. Each chamber along the ship's passage is sealed until the protean moment when it is entered."

"But one failed," Lena replied.

Malachi shrugged. "Time and chance were generous, providing all that was necessary for a freak quantum event to occur." He paused to swallow.

"The process," he continued, "that runs the duplicator, recycles the air, wastes, and water, governs the fluid process of the doorways, perhaps even the frames, might have needed adjusting."

"I wonder," Lena said, "if the mazelike structure of the ship and the web is a clue to the minds of the builders?"

"Maybe they got lost in it," Juan replied.

Malachi looked at him approvingly. "Could be, granting complexities we haven't considered."

Lena stood up. "Sleep or back to digging?"

"I feel refreshed," Malachi said, looking at Juan.

"I'm game."

"I won't sleep soundly," Lena said, "until we know where we are."

Juan crouched in the tunnel and continued to dig. Loose stones and dirt cascaded past him. Six meters in, it was no longer possible to just shovel the dirt out behind him. Each digger filled a sleeping bag cover with dirt, and the others pulled it back on a line.

"Anything?" Lena called to Juan.

Juan stabbed with his shovel and turned his face away. "Nothing!" He dropped his spade, turned off his torch, and crawled backward. Lena gave him a cup of water as he emerged by the pile of dirt. "It could continue for thousands of meters, for all we know," he said, "but it smells damp, which might indicate that we're near the surface." He sat down on the pile.

She emptied the bag and crawled up into the tunnel. Juan watched her feet disappear as he finished his water.

"Damn," Lena's muffled voice said.

"Are you okay?" Juan shouted.

"Just twisted my ankle," she called back, "but not badly."

"Come down. Mal will take over for you."

"I'll manage!"

"We just have to keep digging," Malachi said at the start of his shift. Juan and Lena sat on the pile of dirt, exhausted.

"It seems so hopeless," she said, rubbing her ankle.

"How is it?" Juan asked.

"Better."

The damp smell filled the lock chamber. "We're ten meters in," Juan said, trying to sound hopeful.

Malachi smiled. "Well, back to it."

"I'll take this shift," Juan said. "I won't be able to sleep, anyway."

He got to his feet and crawled up the dark tunnel. When he reached the end, he turned on the torch and picked up the spade. The damp smell was pungent in his nostrils as he began to dig. He was sweating and breathing heavily after only a minute. He stopped, struck the spade into the dirt, and

rested. The universe had closed in around him, forcing him to rebreathe his own air. Blood rushed to his head. After a few minutes, he wanted to sleep, but his legs ached in their rigid position.

"Juan!" Malachi shouted.

He opened his eyes. "Okay!"

He struck the stony earth, loosening large clumps. Might just as well be trying to dig through the sky, he thought, jabbing with the spade, imagining a starry sky somewhere overhead.

He tried to work calmly. There was no rush. They could eat and rest as long as they wanted. The ship would not take off with the lock open. It might if the opening were cleared. He wanted the ship to stay, and feared what that might do to the world. Good might come from the alien technology, if it could be studied. It seemed more likely that it would be used rather than studied, because its inner workings were too well concealed. The promise of a way to anywhere, of numberless worlds to be explored and plundered, would be too much for a problem-ridden humankind. Power would accrue to those who would control access to the web. Titus would not turn away from such power. Knowledge, understanding, humane applications — these were things for true believers, not for those who fancied themselves people of the world, who told themselves that they lived and exercised power according to harsh facts.

It seemed that the only way to remain thoughtful and free of illusion was to live outside the cadres of influence and authority. He had always balanced his doubts about power with the need to get ahead professionally; now his convictions might be tested. The Earth he knew lived on the edge of disaster. Perhaps it just wasn't possible to mold human beings through social systems and laws. The example of extraordinary individuals was not enough to push back the dark. Something better was needed — a more cooperative and intelligent species, one that might create for itself a condition nearer the angels, on some reasonable shore. . . .

But humanity still huddled at the bottom of its time, where the great theologies selected individuals for paradise on the basis of moral attainments, while the godless ruled niches of power and wealth.

Juan struck more deeply as he thought. What are we taking home with us? What will a practical knowledge of the alien web do to us? Suddenly his spade went through into an open space. He breathed in cool, damp air.

"Mal!" He struggled to widen the opening. Chunks of dirt fell past him. He put down his spade, grabbed the torch, and scrambled upward on his knees, rising up into a black space.

"Coming up!" Malachi shouted.

"Come ahead!" Juan called back, casting his beam into a small chamber, maybe ten meters wide, with a low dirt ceiling.

"What's there?" Malachi called as he crawled up.

"Looks like a covered sink hole. I think I can touch the roof if I stand up.

Bring my spade as you come up."

Malachi appeared, spades in one hand, torch in the other. "Doesn't look promising," he said, looking around. "This kind of water-shaped chamber can be deep below the surface."

"We're breathing good air," Juan said, taking his spade and standing up. The ceiling was only a few inches above his head. He tapped it gently.

"Careful," Malachi said, "you don't want to bring it down on us."

"Where's Lena?" Juan asked.

"Resting, but pretty upset about injuring herself."

"I'm going to push through slowly," Juan said, handing him his light and raising his spade.

"Hello!" Lena called from below.

"Bloody hell," Malachi said as a small stone hit him in the head.

Juan pushed up. The spade went in easily.

"Should I come up?" Lena shouted.

"No!" Juan called back as a large chunk of dirt fell down at his feet.

"It's an opening," Malachi said, pointing his beam up into it. "Slight draft. We're into somewhere."

Juan widened the hole and put down his spade. "Boost me up."

Malachi put his hands together. Juan stepped up and grabbed at the rim of the opening. "Got it." He lifted himself up. "Seems like outdoors." He climbed out on both knees and stood up, peering around in the gloom as his eyes adjusted. Mists rolled in around him. The air was hot and humid.

"Where are we?" Malachi shouted.

"Seems tropical. Overcast." Juan felt more than saw the forest around him. Black branches moved in the hot breeze. The air was heavy in his lungs. Warm rain fell suddenly, tasting acrid. The sky flashed. He dropped to his knees and reached down into the hole to help Malachi.

16. The Way to Anywhere

"Halfway across the universe," Juan said, looking up at the sickly white overcast, "to connect with the ass-end of nowhere." Chills crept up his back as he labored to breathe the hot, damp air.

Malachi coughed. "At least it's stopped raining."

"We can't move in these mists."

Malachi said, "I feel a cooler breeze."

Juan looked up again. The clouds were thinning overhead. A bright patch appeared, and the Moon rode out, full and familiar, pocked and stained, shield for lovers, puller of tides, the unfinished port from which humankind had eyed the solar system and longed for the stars. It seemed pitiable now, to dream of taking a vessel to Alpha Centauri in a mere twenty years, round-trip.

"We're home," Malachi said. "I didn't quite believe it."

Juan turned and knelt by the opening. "Lena! I see a full moon, and it's ours!" A snake slid past him in the growth, glistening in the moonlight, oblivious to his presence. He sat back and laughed, but in a moment he was silent and shaking, thinking of what he wanted for himself and Lena, from his work, fearful of what was to come, wishing that Magnus were here.

"Coming!" Lena shouted.

The breaking clouds fled past Luna like hurrying souls.

At dawn, they came out and saw that the ship was entombed in a hill surrounded by jungle. The Sun was a ball of white-hot iron rising over the thicket of trees, vines, and brush, warming wetness back into the sky.

"Smashing heat," Malachi said.

"Glad we dressed light," Lena replied.

They dropped their packs and climbed to the top of the hill. Juan took out his binoculars and scanned in a circle. "There seem to be patches of red desert to the east. Any idea of where we might be?" Lena and Malachi took out their glasses and scanned.

"Somewhere tropical," Malachi replied.

"One thing's sure," Lena said. "No one knows we're here. Without radio or map, we could die trekking through all that."

"It may be the only way," Juan said. "We can't just sit in the ship and hope to be found. Besides, I'm not sure I want anyone to find this ship just yet. I'm for covering this exit. It'll grow over quickly. Do you two feel the same way?"

They nodded. Lena said, "Magnus would have wanted it."

"I don't think the ship will take off," Juan continued, "with two spades lying across the lock, but we can't be sure."

"We're somewhere in the Amazon," Malachi said. "I've seen red patches like that from orbit, where the forest won't ever come back. That means we may be near a highway, either north or south of us. It would be reasonable to make a search, with the ship as a base."

"Can we stop anyone from finding this place?" Juan asked.

Malachi smiled. "You'd like to hide it for a wiser time."

"When do either of you think that will be?" Lena asked.

Malachi shrugged. "Maybe the jolt will do our kind good."

Juan nodded. "We'll have a lot of explaining to do if we march out of here. They'll search the area and find the ship. It might even be transmitting tachyons right now."

Lena said, "Titus isn't stupid. He knows how we left, and he'll assume a ship brought us back, even if they didn't detect its presence."

"We haven't much choice," Juan answered as he took out his spade and started to cover the hole. "We can at least delay them."

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Malachi said. "Everyone will know about it.

They can't hide what happened in Antarctica."

"It'll be up to us," Lena added, "to make sure everyone knows. Keeping secrets is dangerous."

"We'll have to blab," Malachi said, "even if it does get the big-shot brigade stirred up. I must say that I rather liked the idea of being the proud custodian of a big secret, at least for a short time."

Lena turned her head. "Listen!" She pointed away from the Sun. "A whooshing sound."

"We'll go check," Juan said.

"Don't you hear?" she asked. "It's louder."

Juan heard a faint rushing sound. "Just barely." He continued covering the hole.

"Let me," Malachi said, taking the spade from him.

Juan sat down, feeling winded. "God, the air is bad out here. We've been spoiled by the ship."

Malachi finished with the hole and put the spade away. They shouldered their packs and went down the hillside.

"Go slow," Malachi said. "We'll be bathing in sweat soon enough."

The jungle confronted them at the bottom of the hill — a wall of greenery rising twenty meters into the air.

"We'll cut through," Juan said, taking out his spade. Lena and Malachi did the same. He led the way forward.

The sun rose higher, playing hide and seek with them through the leaves. Juan hacked forward, grateful for his boots and coarse clothing. Malachi moved up and worked next to him relentlessly.

"You've done this before," Juan said between breaths.

"Yes, master, I'm very valuable on safari."

"We won't make a hundred yards in an hour," Lena said behind them. "We're soaked through to the skin."

"These packs aren't much help," Juan added, "but we can't get rid of them."

"The sound is louder," Lena said as they paused.

Juan listened. It was a hum, almost a rumble, behind the forest sounds.

"I know what that is," Malachi said. "Heard it before."

"If we don't get somewhere by noon," Juan said, "we'll have to go back to the ship."

"Sooner than that," Lena replied. "Tropic sun is dangerous."

Juan swung at the foliage, willing himself forward. Damp odors of decay filled his lungs, mingling with the smell of flowers and animals.

"Take it easy," Lena gasped, "you'll have a heat stroke."

Juan stopped again and looked around. The shadows of the rain forest were deep, glowing with a green pallor. Juan felt alert, attuned to a dozen different sounds and smells without conscious effort; his eyes tracked insects against the shifting hues of vegetation. A zebra-striped butterfly glided

through a shaft of sunlight; a piece of tree bark moved and became a snake.

"I hope we don't meet anything poisonous," Lena said.

A long howl cut through the humid air, died, and seemed to return as a series of hoots. Moist pellets rained down. "Bird droppings," Malachi said. "They've zeroed in on us."

"I see a pair of brown eyes," Lena said, pointing to her left. "There behind those leaves!" The vegetation stirred and the eyes disappeared.

"Probably a spider monkey," Malachi said.

Juan turned his head suddenly and saw some orchids move. The forest seemed to whisper to him.

"Could be jaguars," Malachi added, "if there are any left."

"Be ready with your handguns," Juan said.

Malachi laughed. "We'd never know what hit us if they were hungry enough to attack. It's the small things that are more likely to kill us — snakes or insects." He peered ahead. "I see a trail."

He swung his spade. Juan and Lena pushed through after him, and they came out on a worn footpath. It cut in from their left and continued forward. Malachi led the way. Juan and Lena hurried after him.

The trail twisted, but kept westward. Juan looked around at the vast superorganism of the jungle, composed of creatures that ranged in size from microbes to large animals, working together under the hot sky, drawing energy from sun and soil, losing it as motion, death, and decay. The forest's immortality was a willful thrust into time, squandering beauty along the way, caring little for the individual.

The trail came to an overgrown incline and ran parallel. "So it is a highway," Malachi said with relief.

They gazed down at the sprawling automated road. Two large trucks rushed by, doing at least a hundred kilometers per hour along their guide path. Two hundred meters across the gray pavement, the jungle resumed its life.

"That's the sound we heard," Lena said.

Malachi nodded. "Of course, we can't stop anything that's running on program."

Three trucks went by and the road was quiet again.

Lena turned her head and said, "Voices."

Juan peered up the road and saw six human figures. Three of them were spraying vegetation, while the others were examining a control box by the roadside. "Looks like maintenance to me."

"Move slowly," Malachi said. "They're armed."

They went down the incline and came out on the shoulder of the road without being noticed.

"Spread out," Malachi said. "We're an easy target together."

"Hello!" Juan shouted as they walked toward the crew. A truck whisked by in the far lane, drowning him out.

"They're wearing fibrous armor and face masks," Malachi said. "Those are military helmets."

"What are they afraid of?" Lena asked.

"Raise your hands and keep them up," Juan whispered. "Hello!"

The figures stopped and stood like statues.

"We're friends!" Juan shouted.

One took a machine gun from his shoulder, pointed it at Juan, and shouted a string of words.

"It isn't Spanish," Juan said.

"Portuguese," Malachi whispered. "I know some." He shouted back and got a vehement reply. "He says to come forward — slowly."

The men came to meet them. The one who seemed in charge stepped up to Juan and seemed to glare at him through his silvered face plate.

"Do you speak English?" Juan asked.

"I do," the big man said. "Stand still and say who you are."

"We're a UN-ERS scientific team," Juan replied.

"Are you armed?" He did not lift his mask.

"Automatics in our packs," Juan said.

"Surrender your weapons. Are there more of you?"

"No," Juan said as three other men surrounded them and began to search their packs. "You have nothing to fear from us," Juan insisted. "We did not approach you with weapons drawn."

The man shrugged. "You won't need them. What is your business here?"

"Where are we, by the way?" Malachi asked, removing the gun casually from Lena's pack and handing it to one of the armed figures.

"Are you joking? Brazil. Where did you think?"

"Of course, old chap, of course," he said, taking out Juan's gun and handing it over. "But you know how easy it is to stray over borders here. My gun's in the lower zipper."

"The nearest border is hundreds of kilometers west of here," the man said with derision.

These were mercenaries, Juan realized. The government provided roads into the dwindling jungle, but private companies kept them open. The swindling and murder of natives, airdrops of contaminated food and clothing, and illegal lumbering and strip mining had been a way of life for most of the last century. UN Earth Resources Security had reversed the Amazon's decline by the turn of the century, but the sheer size of the landmass still made some covert exploitation possible.

"We're lost," Juan said, knowing that the big man was considering whether he should kill them. "Our plane went down east of here. We were making a connection in Lima for a flight to the Antarctic. Can you call for help?"

The big man slid back his mask, revealing a dark, unshaven face. "Of course. There is a government field nearby. We'll take you there. A plane

goes to Lima twice a week — or you can wait for the one to Brasilia in five days." He took his hand away from the machine gun and held up five gloved fingers. "Terrorist indios try to damage the road, but it's hard to do now." He held up his weapon and smiled. "No bullets, just tranks. Better this way than theirs, eh?" He gestured with his left arm. "Our truck, just up the road."

"Thank you," Juan said, trying to hide his fear from the faceless five.

The vehicle was a massive air-conditioned trailer truck. They were shown to a lounge-like area in the rear and left alone.

Malachi tried the door. "It's locked. I'm afraid we can't be sure they'll be helpful."

Lena dropped her pack and sat down in an upholstered chair, looking more angry than afraid. "I can't believe we gave our weapons away. This long run of bad luck will kill us." She looked up and Juan saw that she was struggling to control her fear. "What are we going to do?"

He took off his pack and said, "We might have been killed on the spot if we hadn't surrendered our weapons. We couldn't have prevented a search. Our only chance is to intimidate them with who we are so they won't risk violence."

Malachi let his pack slip to the carpeted floor and said, "Possibly. We haven't actually seen them doing anything. In fact, we may be wrong about who they are."

"Tranquilizer bullets, my ass," Juan said. "These are hired thugs."

Lena took a deep breath and said in a trembling voice, "Who we are is exactly what they're afraid of. They know we'll report their presence."

Malachi said, "Yes, but that may not be enough for them to kill us. They're probably checking on our plane story right now. They'll find out there's been no plane reported lost, but that still won't prove we're lying. How else did we get here? They'll have to consider that we may be telling the truth and let us go."

"Let's hope," Lena said, sitting back in the upholstered chair.

Juan felt a gentle pull as he sat down in the chair next to her. "We're moving." Malachi fell back onto a small sofa and stretched. "Look at this place," Juan said as glasses rattled in the bar.

"No windows," Malachi said. "I saw heavy armor on the outside."

They were silent for a while. Juan listened to the distant whine of the engines. There was nothing to be done until the vehicle reached its destination.

"I wonder," Lena said nervously, "if humankind may be all that's left of the web's builders," and Juan knew that she was trying to distract herself.

"I wouldn't want that to be true," he replied, "and I'd like to think that our history shows we're original to our planet, that we got this far, for what it's worth, on our own, whatever we are. Clearly, we were visited, but that's

a far cry from tracing lineage."

Malachi grimaced. "We're still our jolly old selves, even the cheerless chaps running this bus."

"But what happened," Lena asked, "after the two ships came to Earth?"

"I think I gave the likely explanation for that," Malachi said calmly. "The ships were meant to be terminals, to be left in place. The builders left through the frames."

Lena shifted in the chair. Juan noticed her growing unease as she tried to carry on the discussion. "Then whose skeletons did we find?"

"Intruders," Malachi said, "the same as us, except they died for some reason. Maybe they just starved to death in that chamber after they got in. The door might have failed."

Lena shook her head. "You mean they just went in and never came out?"

Malachi waved his hand as he reclined. "One or two went in and didn't come out. Two more followed and didn't come out. Finally, they were all in and the door failed when they tried to exit."

"Sad," Lena said.

Juan sat back. "I keep wondering if we're the same people who stepped into the frames, or exact duplicates. If not, then our originals died out there." It was the wrong thing to say, he realized as Lena glanced at him.

"We're the originals," Malachi explained, "if our actual atoms were transmitted through the short-space links, and copies if only our patterns went through — that is, if we were scanned and rebuilt according to the same scan from energy available within the system, which would make us exact twins of our originals, who no longer exist. As twins we'll never feel any different. Of course, we'll have to know more about the system to be sure this is the case or not, but my feeling is that the frames are direct bridges — whatever steps in, steps out. Wormholes being opened routinely."

Lena bit her lower lip and looked at Juan. "But we are, well, we are ourselves still, and they're gone, whoever they were."

"We are exactly what we were," Juan answered. "Same memories and feelings, if what Mal says is the case."

"Then what's the point of the distinction?" Lena asked.

"We're another set of the same if the same atoms were not sent and reassembled," Malachi answered. "Of course, socially, it won't make any difference, and subjectively, there's no way for us to tell, since we're the only ones left to remember. Even if we determine the nature of the technology, we won't feel any different."

"But we'll know," Lena said, "that we died out there, as surely as Magnus did — and we may not have much longer to live here."

"Yes," Malachi replied, scowling.

Juan imagined humanity swarming through the web and wondered what other installations the starcrossers had placed in the solar system. There was something inside the Moon; there was probably a station in the Sun. "If we

have our own suncore station," he said, "that might explain some of the anomalous measurements we've had over the last century. The Sun may be draining and won't last as long as we thought. A web of this kind could make a dent in the energy output of whole galaxies."

"Maybe that's why they stopped," Lena said.

Malachi sat up. "We've done the same on Earth, with various nations hogging the world's resources at one time or another."

"But where did the builders go?" Juan asked. "Where are they now?"

Malachi shrugged. "We saw no evidence that they still exist. They went elsewhere, became immaterial, or merely perished in some way too subtle for them to have understood or prevented."

"Since we won't be able to hide what we've learned," Lena said, "we'll have to try to influence how it will be used, how it will be revealed." She smiled and added bitterly, "If we live."

"How?" Juan asked.

"Maybe by not telling everything at once."

"Whatever we do," Juan said, "nothing will ever be the same again."

Malachi took a deep breath and smiled. "Perhaps no one will find the ship, or us, if these chaps kill us. They'll not know we ever came home."

Juan was silent; Lena glanced at him. After a few moments Malachi motioned to them. They all moved toward the center of the room. "It's possible we're being listened to," Malachi whispered.

"It can't make any sense to them," Juan replied. "It's all out of context."

"We're slowing," Lena said as the glasses and bottles rattled again in the bar. Juan looked at her and Malachi, and suddenly realized that these might be their final moments.

17. Discrete Orbits

Five shabby brick blockhouses made up the airport complex. The big man showed them into a room and smiled as he took off his helmet. "You will wait here, please." He sat down in a chair by the door and closed his eyes.

Juan went over to the lone, barred window and looked out at the sun-blasted runway; it seemed long enough to land a jet. He thought of the ship in the hill, and its twin in the distant suncore. We've come back across time again, he thought. It was all a dream, the ships and web. How much was true, and how much had he and his companions invented in their clumsy efforts to understand the unknown? Was there something in the ship with which they had communicated? It was all fragile guesswork.

He turned from the window as Lena approached their guard. "What are we waiting for?" she demanded.

The man opened his eyes and smiled. "It will be a few minutes only. To-

day's plane for Lima was canceled."

"May we make a phone call?" Malachi asked politely. "There will be concern if we don't arrive on time."

This seemed to upset the big man. He got up, opened the door, and left, locking it behind him.

"What was that about?" Lena asked.

"Magic words," Malachi said. "A test, actually. They may now let us use a phone, to find out whom we shall call. That will suggest to them how they should behave toward us."

Juan took a deep breath. "You may have just saved our lives." Lena looked slightly relieved.

Malachi said, "If they're going to kill us, it will have to be before any phone calls. That way we stay missing." He tried the heavy door, without success.

They waited in silence. Juan tried to control his anxiety by staring out the window. He tensed as he heard the door open behind him.

"Come with me," the big man's voice said.

Juan turned around and saw the machine pistol in the man's right hand. Malachi went out through the open door. Lena followed. Juan hurried after her. The big man smiled at him as he went out.

The Brazilian herded them along toward the next blockhouse, then opened the door and motioned for them to go inside. "What's this?" Juan demanded.

"Phone," the big man replied, gesturing with his weapon.

Juan followed Lena and Malachi inside. The door closed behind him; the lock clicked.

On the desk in the center of the room stood a phone. "They'll be listening on a spare," Malachi said.

Juan sat down at the desk, started to punch in the coded number, then stopped.

"What's wrong?" Lena asked.

"What's the rest?"

Malachi reached over and entered the final digits. They waited as the call went through.

Titus Summet gaped at Juan from the screen, then blinked. "What? Where are you?"

"Somewhere in the Amazonian jungle. Before you do anything else, Titus, note our exact location and identify yourself."

Summet glared at him for a moment, then nodded and said, "Titus Summet here, Director, UN Earth Resources Security. What do you need, Dr. Obrion?" His upper lip twitched slightly.

"We're in Brazil," Juan said, trying to smile. "We missed our connection in Lima when our plane went down."

Summet stepped out of view. Lena and Malachi glanced at Juan appre-

hensively before the director's image reappeared. "Have you identified yourselves to the local authorities?" he asked.

"Not yet," Juan replied. "They haven't asked for formal introductions."

"Who's with you?" He peered out from the screen. "Dravic and Moede. Good. I'll send a plane to take you to Miami. Check into the Singapore, and stay put until I get there. Are you in any difficulty right now?"

"Uncertain," Juan said.

"I'll do what I can. Just get on that plane when it arrives. It's out of Lima, so it should be quick."

The screen faded before Juan could tell him about Magnus. Juan looked at Malachi. "Well, what do you think?"

"We'll see."

Lena said, "I think he understood."

"This is his chance," Juan said, "to turn things around. It couldn't have been good for him politically to lose us and the alien ship. He wants us safe, under his direct control, so he can decide how to let all this play out."

Malachi nodded. "He'll meet us alone, or with someone he trusts, to keep this from Dovzhenko while he secures the ship. He has no reason to think we came back in any other way."

"In a way," Lena said, "we did come back in a ship."

Malachi asked, "Do we just disappear when we get to Miami?"

"He might meet us at the plane, if I know Titus."

Lena said, "We should be clear on what we want. Titus needs us. But we need him if we want to continue to work and have any say in this." She waved her hand. "I know — my first impulse is to go and hide somewhere — but I think we should at least start with Titus and see where he stands. Secrecy is just not productive in the end, and they'll find out, anyway. We'll have to tell someone sooner or later."

"I agree," Malachi said.

Juan nodded. "If they let us out of here."

Juan watched the small hydro-jet with UN-ERS markings land and taxi. The door to the blockhouse opened; the big man looked disappointed as he motioned for them to come out, and led them to the aircraft.

"Thanks a packet," Malachi said to him as they reached the plane. The Brazilian gave a wolfish grin as they climbed inside.

The jet took them up into a blue sky, reducing the jungle to a carpet of broccoli with burnt-out patches. The weather turned cloudy. The craft climbed above the overcast and whispered north.

"I wonder what Titus said when he sent the word down," Lena said in the window seat next to Juan.

Malachi grimaced. "What worries me is how the message got down to these thugs after it reached the official recipients."

"If it got down," Lena replied. "They might have simply let us go, fearing

trouble."

Juan sipped his drink and gazed out at the calm ocean off Miami Beach, feeling as if he had returned from the dead. It was quiet here on the twentieth floor of the hotel. The immediate past seemed unreal, the present suspended. He tried not to think about Titus and what the web's discovery would do to the world. The director had not met them at the airport, which indicated a measure of trust.

Closing his eyes, he breathed in the salty air and took a long pull of the bourbon and water. The wet glass reminded him of chilled strawberries. He heard a footfall and opened his eyes. Lena sat down in the chair next to him and smiled as she adjusted her white robe.

"Where's Mal?" he asked.

"Showering." She looked out to sea. "Do you feel strange? As if we're not really back. Time is slow, memory false."

She gazed at him, and he wondered if now there would be time to say things, to explore each other, to have feelings without the threat of danger.

"Juan," she started to say, looking worried. Her eyes opened wide, and he saw that she wanted to say something, but held back.

He drained his glass and put it down by his chair, wondering how he felt about her.

She smiled when he looked at her again. "Too many drinks," he said, feeling suddenly that he could not doubt her, that being without her friendship, at the very least, was unimaginable.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I never had time to allow feelings to grow. Physics requires such a huge initial investment of time, simply to reach competence, much less shine."

They were silent. "What will they let us do?" she asked.

"They'll have to keep the three of us together," he said, looking at his watch. "Titus will be here any moment."

"What do you think will happen?"

He picked up his glass and looked at the melting ice, then drank some of the water. "A green comet will come by." He rattled the cubes. "Its green gas will cover our planet, making us all good and full of foresight. We might even grow an extra eye in our heads." He laughed and put down the glass. "We're capable of everything and we accomplish nothing — nothing that goes very deep at any rate. You grow a human being until he's full of knowledge and complex insights, until he feels deeply and knows what is right, and then he dies. . . ."

"It's like breaking fine musical instruments as soon as they're seasoned," she said. "But you can't blame humanity for being subject to death, Juan. We haven't had time to beat it yet."

He turned his head suddenly. "That's the doorbell. He'll have a key. Come in, Titus, we're on the balcony!"

The door opened and closed. Juan stared at a ship on the horizon. "We're out here!" he repeated.

"Doctor Obrion?" a voice asked. "We've never met. Titus Summet sent me here to debrief your team. My name is Magnus Rassmussen."

The glass slipped from Juan's hand and shattered on the hard floor. "What the hell?"

"Summet will definitely be here tomorrow." There was no mistaking the voice. Juan looked at Lena, got up, and staggered into the suite.

The tall man confronted him with Magnus's contemplative gaze. His gray hair was more closely cropped. He wore a khaki suit with an open white shirt, and he held a briefcase in his right hand.

"How did you get here?" Juan asked, shaken.

Lena came in. Malachi burst out of the bathroom in his towel. The man stared at them, puzzled. "I flew in from New York. What's wrong?"

Magnus lived — but the relief and joy welling up inside Juan was out of place; how could the man be alive?

Lena hurried up to the tall man. "It is you!"

"You have a twin," Malachi said.

"What do you mean?" the man asked.

Lena regained her composure and stepped back. "You have no idea what a shock this is to us."

The visitor sat down in a chair with the briefcase in his lap and looked up at each of them in turn. "I was to have gone with you to the Antarctic, but I know the three of you only by reputation."

"What have you been told?" Juan asked.

"Why, everything that happened in the Antarctic. You're to tell me what happened after the alien ship carried you away."

Juan glanced at Malachi, then at Lena. "Magnus, we can't account for your presence here."

The man had winced at the sound of his first name. "What do you mean? We've never met, and I don't have a twin brother."

Juan said, "Who are you? The three of us saw you die."

The man's grimace shook Juan's confidence. A bit thinner, less hair and a few more wrinkles, but this was Magnus Rassmussen.

"It's true," Lena said. "You went with us."

Rassmussen frowned at her.

"We buried you," Malachi said, "insane as it sounds."

Juan gazed intently at the man he had come to admire. Rassmussen looked puzzled and said, "I cannot imagine why you would say these things to me." He fumbled nervously with his briefcase and took out a small recorder. "But start from the beginning, and tell a dead man everything you can recall."

It was evening when Juan finished. With the recorder still on, Magnus said, "So the frames not only bridge space but allow passage across proba-

bility. The three of you have returned to a world where I didn't go with you. And if symmetry is conserved, your twins from here are just as puzzled somewhere else."

"Schrödinger's Door," Malachi said from the sofa.

"Exactly," Magnus answered, sitting back in his chair.

Juan got up and began to pace the room again. "It also worries us," he said, "that if we've been duplicated — that is, if the frames are not direct bridges — then we've not only crossed lines of probability, but we're not our original selves."

Lena bit her lower lip and reached down to pour herself another cup of coffee from the tray on the floor. "We may have died in one of these universes," she said shakily as she sat back in her chair.

Magnus nodded. "And there's one in which only two of you survived, or one — an infinite series of branchings, constantly splitting, diverging at every point throughout the cosmos."

"Can this explain what happened to the builders?" she asked.

"We must assume," Magnus said, "that they knew enough physics to understand what their frames would do. They might have planned to use the web in this way, accepting a social system based on variant individuals. We can only speculate."

"What about asymmetrical effects?" Juan asked.

Magnus raised his eyebrows. "You think the builders might have disappeared from our universe — I mean your universe. They may be present in this one, for all we know."

"Could they have all disappeared in such a way?" Lena asked.

"With endless probability available, even asymmetry must occur."

"We didn't see enough of the web," Malachi said, "to know if it's deserted, or, for that matter, if there is a web beyond what we saw."

Magnus nodded. "The builders may not be here either — if probable worlds run in a spectrum of fine shadings, with minor differences packed closely together. You'd have to travel far off your reference axis to run into a major difference. It would be interesting to do so."

Juan stopped pacing. "The builders ran into the splitter effect, although we can't be certain of that. But they decided to use the web, anyway, but I don't see how a probability might be drained of their presence. Maybe they decided to abandon the web, which they at first built to connect suns, ships, and planets, but as they developed, they decided to leave natural worlds for new life, realizing that taking all that power might prevent fresh intelligences from arising. Maybe they realized that new minds are the most precious things in nature — so they moved beyond the use of natural worlds and now live in mobile habitats, obtaining their needed resources from sun systems not likely to produce new life."

"All this may be true," Magnus replied. "Some of the starcrossers may still exist in our spaces, in distant sectors of their web, and in mobile worlds.

Others may have left our space-time. But I'm not sure we can credit them with compassion for other life on the basis of what you've seen." He paused for a moment, as if listening to an inner voice. "Curious. As you spoke, Juan, I felt as if I were remembering being out there with you."

"Perhaps there's some leakage between probabilities," Lena said. "What if all probabilities are one and the same at a basic level, except when separated by technical means?"

"Disturbing," Magnus replied.

Lena got up, went over to the door, and turned on the overhead light, dimming it to a comfortable glow. Juan sat down in a chair. "Magnus, may I ask you a personal question?"

The older man looked at him as if he knew what it would be. "Go ahead."

"Are you under Summet's thumb?"

"What do you mean?" Magnus asked softly.

"We have to know what kind of man Summet is here," Juan said.

Magnus nodded. "Yes, I suppose I am. He sent me because he could trust me, and because I would have gone with you. Look, he's given me all the chances I deserve at my age, so you might say I'm his man. He's never asked me to be dishonest. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"What's happening at the Directorate?" Juan asked.

Magnus took a deep breath. "Titus may be replaced if he's seen to be making too many mistakes, even if they aren't mistakes. In your world he may have already been replaced. Your return may help him stay in office." Magnus smiled wanly. "You must admit, it's a first-class secret you've brought back, and the fact of your return will confirm his judgment in sending you."

"Has our return gotten out yet?" Juan asked.

"I'm the only one he called, but he's worried about the mercenaries. I'm sure you didn't intentionally tell them anything, but did you discuss things among yourselves when you were alone? Your conversations might have been overheard or recorded. Granted, little of what you said might have been understood, but it might make sense to others later."

"We're worried," Juan said, "about how Titus will use all this. Will he enhance UN-ERS power or ally himself with national groups, if they don't already control him?"

"He needs everyone," Magnus answered. "Remember, the UN-ERS bureaucracy is one thing, but the national bureaucracies of the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South America, and the European States sit within it, and Titus has to play them off against each other for some kind of balance. Environmental problems tend to moderate these rivalries, but the totalitarians are still with us, dedicated to the control of wealth through short-sighted means. You'll have to work with Titus to have any leverage. He knows only about a ship, and nothing about the web or this probability effect. Lack of knowledge could make this all very dangerous. Even vague suspicions about

hidden facts could turn things nasty."

"He's right," Malachi said. "If we disappeared, they'd still discover everything for themselves, so it's up to us to help determine how the world will use all this, as much as we can."

"And save Titus's ass in the bargain," Juan added.

"It must not be a matter of personalities," Magnus said. "Someone worse may replace Titus."

"Juan, he's right," Lena said. Malachi nodded.

"It's only just," Magnus continued, "that you all benefit from and help guide what happens to this discovery. The politics will be bad enough without your stepping aside."

"You're right," Juan said. He relaxed a little, then wondered if his father was alive in this world. It would be that way, he realized, discovering differences of detail, but no changes in humankind.

Magnus stood up and walked over to the bar cart. Slowly, he dropped a cube of ice in a glass and poured some bourbon. He sipped and turned around. "I know you feel that you've lost your world. Worse, you doubt your identities. But, if you will forgive a more impersonal attitude, there's still a lot left — everything essential, in fact."

Relativity and quantum mechanics, Juan realized, might have profound psychological implications. Was there some observer effect that had drawn them into this world, where Magnus lived, and not another? Juan felt the darkness within himself. How many of him had stepped across the night sky? Perhaps the infinity of variants merged together to produce peak moments, a richness of reality, a texture of psychological contingency that could never be exhausted. Were dreams and multiple personalities the overlap between variants? Was the mystery he sometimes saw in the eyes of another a sign of possibility splitting at each firing of a synapse in the brain? Life seemed thin at times, with people moving in discrete orbits, circling some vast emptiness, yearning to touch, to quantum-leap into a more intense state, there to combine into greater wholes. The fearful masters of humankind's world — this variant included — had set themselves to choke possibility, chain creativity to politics and economic interests, hold back the waves that yearned to break on kinder shores. New doors were opening, but others were closing behind him. Could he believe that the four people in this room could dispense the blessings of the web to humankind? They understood and cared, he told himself; but to succeed demanded more than moral ideals — it demanded their violation in the name of greater ideals. Perhaps Titus was necessary, after all.

"What now?" Lena asked Magnus, and Juan felt that a million years had passed. He hungered for the simple absence of disappointment, for naive hope; perhaps the cauldron of probability might give it to him.

Magnus looked down into his drink and said, "Unless you all feel otherwise. I won't keep you here, and I won't insist on what you should tell Ti-

tus. You can do what you wish with the disk in that recorder."

Lena went up to him and said, "You are still one of us."

He smiled. "How could I be otherwise, now that you've told me about myself. By the way, I would be very interested in reading my . . . namesake's entries in his notebook."

"I have it safe," Lena said.

"What prevented you from going with us?" Juan asked, suddenly fearing for him again.

"Oh, a bit of illness." He wandered over to the open balcony. "So I'm buried out there, under an alien tree." He gazed dispassionately at the bright, starry sky, then took a long sip from his drink and said, "How poetic a way to end." ✿

[This two-part serialization of "Stranger Suns" by George Zebrowski is the first third of a novel of the same title to be published by Bantam Spectra in 1991.]



Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note! Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should be sent to our editorial office: Amazing® Stories, *P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147-0111.*

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

I write this in answer to Mr. Tulk's letter published in the January 1990 issue of your magazine.

Mr. Tulk claims "the impetus of the [fundamentalist Christians'] attack on evolutionary theory is fear that [their] beliefs cannot stand up to the light cast upon the universe by modern science." What of the attack of evolutionists on creationism? Neither theory has substantial proof to date, and I don't see any surfacing in the near future as neither seems to be provable.

As to a "finite, mechanistic, earthbound god that can be contained within the limits of human intellect," if Mr. Tulk can fully understand the ability to speak the universe into existence or especially something so complex as the human body, then I bow to him. His intellect must far outshine that of any other human to have ever lived. Personally, I find evolution rather "earthbound" and "finite." It's a typical example of the human species's habit of explaining away anything it can't comprehend. Evolutionists explain their brainchild as the only reasonable explanation of life. Taken as a whole or even as isolated individual cases, the mathematical probabilities involved in evolution are so infinitesimal as to be zero. Evolution? Reasonable? Take a closer look. I think, because of the prejudice and brainwashing of the world today, you'll find your views to be naive and close-minded.

Sincerely,
Jay Carper
PSC BX 8462
Goodfellow AFB, TX 76908

Dear Mr. Price,

"Motive, Method, and Opportunity" [September 1990], Kristine Kathryn Rusch's essay on the decline of the short story, was right on target. The short story is a subject Ms. Rusch is obviously an authority on. During the past year, the short fiction in *Amazing Stories* that touched me most was the short fiction by Ms. Rusch. I do hope she picks up the Campbell Award this year. *[Ed.: She did!]*

Rusch's essay expresses, albeit more eloquently, many of the same concerns I have expressed of late. The short story is a remarkable art form, and often a more memorable literary experience than the novel. I grew up preferring Ellison over Heinlein (partially politically motivated) and Bloch over King. Economy is art.

I urge all good people to help rescue the speculative short story by supporting the SF magazines. If your tastes run in a more macabre direction, try some of the small-press horror maga-

zines. Please, support the magazines of your choice.

Thank you,
Timothy M. Walters
Muskogee OK

Dear Editor:

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "Motive, Method, and Opportunity" looks at first like a solid piece of investigating reporting. But the case doesn't hold up under examination.

According to Rusch, "only three hundred short stories cross the newsstand racks" in a year's time, as compared to "hundreds of novels." (She gives no source for these numbers. Five minutes' detective work tells a different tale, after a check of the February 1990 *Locus*. The count of original novels published in 1989 is 808, while columnist Mark R. Kelly estimates the number of short stories professionally published during the same year at 1,100, some 700 of which he read personally. By that tally, short stories actually outnumber novels and obviously are in no danger of a swift demise.

That's not to say there aren't difficult issues facing SF as it evolves. But the "death of the short story" clearly isn't one of them.

Sincerely,
John C. Bunnell
12320 SW Center St., #32
Beaverton OR 97005

Dear Mr. Price,

This letter is in regard to an essay in your September 1990 issue, "Motive, Method, and Opportunity" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Before I say anything else, let me applaud it. Ms. Rusch is a genius and a saint, and I just subscribed to Pulphouse based solely on the merit of that one essay. But . . .

Can you think of anything more annoying than a super-wealthy relative coming to a family funeral and saying, "It's really too bad you couldn't afford the cure; I loved him, too"?

How about King or Koontz or one of the other biggies giving a little something back? How about Harlan Ellison's Science Fiction Magazine? How about the rest of you up there forming a trust that would give some of us groundlings a shot.

How much would you have to put in a low-yield, low-risk investment to pay the expenses without ever touching the original money, anyway? Maybe I'm way off the beam, but I heard somewhere that the average big stock portfolio is bringing down around fourteen percent. Mr. Fourteen Million, theoretically, should be able to give back one, right? A little EFT and poof! Major tax shelter.

Horray for the essay, sir. Greed is our enemy. It is shrinking the ozone and the Amazon and our chances. I think it might just be killing the short story, too.

The short story is too old and fundamental an art to be "murdered." It's bigger than us, thank God. It and cockroaches will survive the next nuclear bar fight, but may not outlive cable TV.

Best wishes,
James T. Hughes III
HHSB 2-9 FA Box 82
APO, NY 09281

Dear Editor,

You may have heard the word plagiarism used in relation to lawsuits in the publishing and recording industries. You may also have had classroom discussions about academic plagiarism. Plagiarism is the act of using another person's ideas or expressions in your own writing without acknowledging

the source. The word comes from the Latin word *plagiarius* ("kidnapper"), and Alexander Lindey defines it as "the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of another's mind, and presenting it as one's own" (*Plagiarism and Originality*, New York: Harper, 1952). In short, to plagiarize is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you could have in fact borrowed from someone else.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "Living the Legend" [November 1990] could have been carefully created, original to the last detail, but because of the extraneous similarities to "The Little Marmaid" by Hans Christian Andersen, I am inclined to simply say that she plagiarized the whole story and changed it a little to sell it to *Amazing Stories*. Some of the similarities such as the dagger could have been expressed in terms of symbolism instead of expressed literally in order to avoid the possibility of plagiarism. The only change in the story was the time era. If Hans Christian Andersen was employed by Disney, then no one would dare to write anything close to it. I am surprised that such an unprofessional work would be put in *Amazing Stories*!

I plagiarized the first paragraph from the *Modern Language Association Handbook*.

Sincerely,
Clem Cheng
2805 Huntington Drive
San Marino CA 91108-2220

Dear Clem:

Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" is my favorite fairy tale. I have not plagiarized it; I have written an homage to it. I refer to the fairy tale throughout "Living The Legend." In fact, the title itself carries such a reference. An homage is a valid literary expression. Most writers write at least one throughout their careers. The writers whose work come immediately to mind are Robert Sivlerberg (whose homages have received awards), Charles de Lint (whose wonderful homage novel, Jack the Giant Killer, *is now out in paperback), and Stephen King (whose novel,* Salems Lot, *pays homage to Bram Stoker's* Dracula*).*

I suggest that you do a bit more homework before you fire off a letter filled with accusations. And do look up the authors I mentioned. You'll have an enjoyable reading experience.

Sincerely,
Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are *reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. Also, feel free to respond to other issues — be they about writing, the SF and fantasy community, or the state of affairs in the world at large. We do value your opinions, though we may not agree with them. So, write to us!*

— Patrick Lucien Price

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